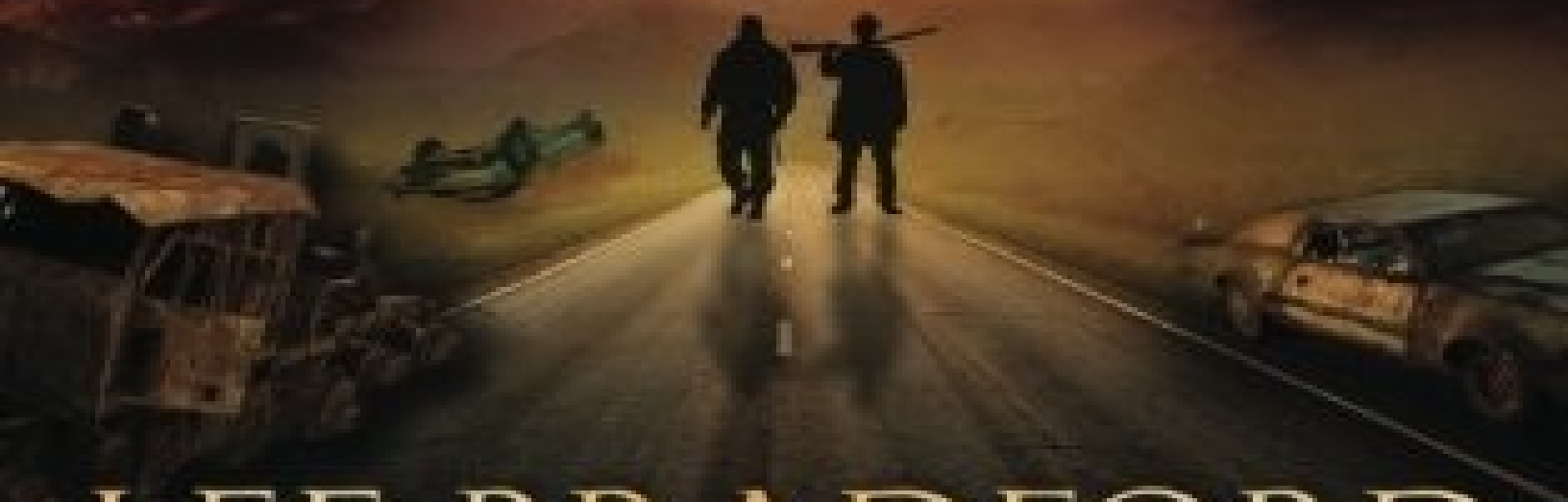


THE PREPPER SERIES

LONG ROAD TO SURVIVAL



LEE BRADFORD



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Long Road to Survival: The Prepper Series

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Dedication

To my wife and children.

And to my mother who taught me from a young age to always pray for the best and prepare for the worst.

Chapter 1

The Hyundai Starex van cut through the sand-swept highway just north of the Yemeni port city of Aden at high speed. In the back was BBC foreign correspondent Nick Lowel and his crew: their local interpreter Naseem Al-Harazi; cameraman Jeremy Evans from Blackpool; and soundman Ellis Ferguson, an East Londoner with a penchant for loose women and dangerous situations. All four wore black bags pulled down over their heads.

In the front seats were two men from an Al-Qaeda splinter group named the Islamic Liberation Organization. The organization's declaration of war against America hadn't been anything new, but the recent upstart's close ties with major Saudi power players were. That was the main reason Nick Lowel had spent the better part of a month in Aden, trying to secure an interview with the group's elusive leader, Abdul Shallah. A former CIA informant, Shallah had spent years studying the inner workings of the American intelligence apparatus he pretended to work for before revealing himself as a double agent.

Truck bombs rammed into three American embassies throughout the Middle East, all within seconds of each other, had signalled his resignation. But far more than that, it had pointed toward a man with exceptional leadership and logistical abilities. If the CIA and FBI hadn't been paying attention before, they certainly were now.

Hence the black hoods and the top-secret location. To combat the threat of American drone strikes, the terrorists had painted a red crescent on the roof of the van, the Middle East's equivalent of the Red Cross.

Nick was certain that when his meeting with the terrorist leader made the nightly news, it would top even ABC reporter John Miller's 1998 interview with Osama bin Laden.

They drove for another hour in stifling hundred-degree heat. Yemen's temperature was considered mild for the Middle East, a fact Nick was more thankful for than ever. His best guess was that they were being taken through the Al Maqatirah Mountains. But even in this line of work, knowing too much could put your life in danger.

Nick squeezed his cameraman Jeremy Evans' arm as a way of making sure his friend and colleague was okay. A thirst was clawing at Nick's throat, made desperate with the knowledge he couldn't lift his hood even if he had anything to drink. Jeremy returned the gesture and passed it on to the others in the rear.

The van slowed to the sound of goats crossing the road in front of them. The ILO fighter in the front passenger seat turned around and spoke in a thick foreign accent. "It will not be much longer," he said. "Do not try to remove your hoods."

He didn't exactly say, "or else you'll be shot," but the implication was pretty clear.

Nick's heart was pounding in his ears the way it always did before a major story. For a moment, he tried to place the man's accent. He wasn't a Yemeni, that was for sure. He sounded French, maybe Algerian. The international makeup of ILO's jihadists would form the backbone of Nick's report. They were galvanizing disenfranchised young men and women from around the globe—Muslims and Christians alike—each searching for meaning in an otherwise bland and safe Western existence. Nick had done a story back in 2009 on how teenagers in middle-class neighborhoods resorted to crime as a cure for boredom. It seemed a parent's drive to provide their children with a peaceful environment filled with great opportunities sometimes backfired. But police in suburbs around America didn't need to watch Nick's report to know that rebellious teenagers in search of excitement often showed poor impulse control.

The real game-changer was the ILO's use of the internet as a recruiting tool. Now young men and women in unprecedented numbers were stepping on flights bound for the Middle East in order to join the terrorist organization. The idea sounded romantic, but by the time they grasped the brutal reality of life as a jihadi fighter, it was too late to go back home.

The van pulled to a sudden stop, forcing Nick and the others to brace themselves against the seats before them. A figure scrambled into the back and ripped their hoods off. Blinding sunlight burned their squinting eyes. As they adjusted, a desert landscape began to take shape. Before them sat a series of low mud-brick buildings, not the sort of opulence one would expect from a terrorist organization pulling in millions a day from donations, extortions and a host of other illegal activities. But Nick knew the simple dwellings were another tactic designed to fool American drones.

The driver exited and strode to the back door, sliding it open with a swing of his powerful arm. When he spoke, he had the slightest hint of a British accent.

"We are here," he told them, motioning to one of the humble buildings. "Abdul Shallah will see you now."

Chapter 2

The room they were led into might as well have been in a remote Afghan village. A patterned Persian rug covered the dusty floor. A mahogany chair with wide armrests sat against the far wall. Behind it stood a black curtain and laid out on the ground before the chair were a half-dozen pillows.

Nick and his men were instructed to set up their equipment and they did as they were told, checking battery life and mounting the Sony Betacam on its tripod. For a normal interview, a minimum of two cameras were used, sometimes three—one for the interviewer, one for the interviewee and a third for a wide-angle shot of both of them. Given the dimness of the room, Nick wondered if lighting would be a problem, but they'd simply have to make do.

Moments later, after they'd finished their preparations, Abdul Shallah entered. He wasn't particularly tall or short. Nor particularly handsome or repugnant. In fact, he was rather average-looking. The kind of man who could walk the street without drawing a second glance. And perhaps that was the secret to his success. In another life he might have been a bus driver, a fish merchant or even a beggar, but somehow fate had placed him here at this time and place and Nick was determined to introduce the Western world to the man he believed was their biggest threat.

Shallah sat in the mahogany chair and began talking. Right from the start it became clear the terrorist leader wasn't interested in questions. He had a message he wanted to get out.

"Fellow sons and daughters of Allah, join me in rejoicing in the utter annihilation of America," Shallah began. For the next several moments the man railed against the world's only superpower over a litany of perceived abuses. Nick's spirits began to dim. Had he come all this way to hear the very same garbage the ILO had posted all over YouTube? He wasn't here to act as a delivery boy for Shallah's message of hate. The terrorist group had promised a scoop like no other. They'd said they'd seen Nick's work on the BBC and admired his commitment to covering stories in the region. That was how they'd convinced him to make the trip, dragging his reluctant crew along with him. Now it was beginning to look as though Nick had made a mistake. He could just imagine their drive back to the hotel in Aden. It would be quiet, the air filled with accusing glances from Jeremy and Ellis. Their interpreter Naseem would be far less bothered since, as the Americans liked to say, he didn't have any skin in the game.

Then Shallah paused to sip the tea next to him. Steam rose up from the small cup as he brought it to his lips. When he set it back down, there was a change in his expression. It was as though he'd addressed the party line and was now free to move on to the story Nick had been promised.

"Over the past six years," Shallah began, "contacts in Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, and Russia have helped us procure ten nuclear warheads."

Nick felt the moisture in his mouth evaporate at once. He glanced back at their only camera to make sure Shallah's words were being recorded.

"Each of these weapons has been loaded onto cargo ships destined for ports along every shore of the United States. God willing, the carnage which will follow will make 9/11 seem like child's play. Today the students become the masters."

When Shallah stopped speaking, no one in the tiny mud structure uttered a single word. Even their breathing seemed to have stopped. Nick remembered bin Laden's interview in '98. He'd boasted about bringing America to its knees, but at the time he'd been vague, saying the world would learn about what they'd done on the news. Shallah's terrorist threat was far more specific.

That sinking feeling in the pit of Nick's belly was still there as Shallah rose from his seat and left the room. Each of the men turned and stared at one another. But it was the look of fear creeping up Naseem's face which told Nick they had good reason to be worried. Not just because of what was about to happen—assuming that Shallah's threat was real—but more because if it was, then Nick and the others knew far too much.



After leaving the Westerners, Abdul Shallah found his second-in-command Hasan Al-Umari. "Is everything in place?"

"All ships have reported in," Hasan replied. He had pale skin even for an Afghan and piercing blue eyes to complete the illusion that he'd been born on a different continent. "They are approaching the shore as we speak. God willing our plan has not been compromised."

"Good. Tell them to await my command."

Hasan nodded, lowering his head. "What should be done about the reporters?"

"Hold them for now," Shallah said. "We cannot risk word getting out before the infidels receive the full measure of the education in store for them."

"Understood."

"Only when we're sure of success do I want infidels to see the face of the man who brought America to its knees."

Chapter 3

Forty-six-year-old Paul Edwards was fixing a leaky pipe in the basement of his house when the phone rang. At least, he was doing his best—but a handyman he was not and what had begun as a simple leak was fast becoming a flood.

He glanced up briefly before returning to tightening the brass compression fitting. *Might help if I cut the water first*, he chided himself. Paul went to the main valve and twisted the blue handwheel until the dripping stopped.

Voilà.

Whoever said he wasn't good with his hands? His wife would be proud.

Upstairs the phone was still screaming for his attention. After eight rings the voice mail would kick in. If it was important enough, whoever was calling would leave a message. No message meant they were probably a telemarketer. A call that usually went something like:

"Hello, may I speak to Mr. Paul Edwards, please?"

"You got him."

"Mr. Edwards, this is a courtesy call on behalf of Tri-America to let you know how you can lower your monthly interest rates."

"Thanks, but I already got that one covered. Don't borrow from the banks. Now it's my turn to ask you a question. You ever heard of the national telemarketer no-call list?"

That was when the line usually went dead.

Upstairs the phone stopped ringing for barely a moment before it started up again.

The only person who called back like that was Paul's wife Susan, and the only time she did that was when there was an emergency. Heart beating a little quicker, Paul set the wrench down on top of the ladder, stepped down and began heading upstairs.

Susan was down in Atlanta at Georgia State University, helping their daughter Autumn, a freshman, put the finishing touches on her new apartment. The week before Paul had been down there himself, helping Autumn set up a giant stack of Ikea furniture, and he still had the callouses to prove it. Now it was Susan's turn to head down and work her own brand of magic. It also gave the girls an excuse to indulge in their favorite pastime: shoe shopping.

But that wasn't a problem since Paul had learned to appreciate whatever alone time he could get. Besides, it would give him a chance to finally balance the books for his music store in Greenwood, Nebraska and maybe even write a new song or two while he was at it.

In the late eighties, Paul had been what his daughter would have called a celebrity. Although back then rock star would have done just fine. Nowadays, another term had grown up to describe the meteoric rise and fall of Paul Edward's career: One-hit wonder.

Paul reached the cordless phone in the kitchen in the middle of the fifth ring.

"Everything all right, honey?"

Susan was out of breath. "Have you been watching the news?"

Paul's heart was moving from a rapid thump into a full-blown gallop. "What's going on?"

"Just do it."

Crossing the room with the phone to his ear, Paul did as she said and switched on the TV. The station was set to ESPN, since that was what he'd been watching last night as he ate dinner alone. The Mets had been playing the Brewers. He flicked it over to a news channel.

A woman holding a microphone stood beside a shipping container with what looked like Russian writing on the bow.

"Authorities have begun to evacuate Seattle's main port after sensors detected high levels of radioactivity coming from one of the containers on board an incoming freighter. Originating from the Russian port of Vladivostok, the ship appears to be owned and operated by Dobroflot Shipping."

Paul flipped the channel. But it didn't matter where he went since all of them were covering the same story.

The shipping lanes were America's Achilles heel. The Department of Homeland Security was taking measures to screen incoming cargo vessels for radioactive materials smuggled in by terrorists intent on constructing a dirty bomb in American streets. But the prohibitive costs meant only a small percentage of cargo containers could be scanned.

As usual, CNN was having a field day.

"Calls to the Russian shipping company weren't immediately returned. Still more puzzling to authorities is the identity of the captain and crew of the suspect vessel. All of them appear to be from the Middle Eastern country of Yemen."

The phone wasn't next to Paul's ear anymore, but he could still hear the muffled sound of Susan speaking.

"It's all right," he tried to tell her. "The Feds have the ship, all they gotta do now is pinpoint the container it's in...."

Those words had no sooner come out of his mouth when the screen lit up with a blinding flash of light. The reporter only had time to start turning her head before she disappeared and the image cut back to a surprised anchorman.

"Looks like we've lost the connection. We'll try and get that back up and...." The anchor's finger went to his ear. The producer was saying something and Paul could see the tension building in the anchorman's facial features. "We're getting reports of an explosion in Seattle."

They cut to a shot from the outskirts of Seattle and Paul gasped at what he saw. The distinctive shape of a mushroom cloud rising up over the city.

Fumbling for the remote, Paul turned the volume up. He put the phone back to his ear. "You seeing this?" he asked Susan.

Then from the television: "Additional word coming in now of another explosion in Los Angeles. Reports from BBC correspondent Nick Lowel indicate a group led by the enigmatic Abdul Shallah and calling itself the Islamic Liberation Organization has taken responsibility for the unthinkable attack."

The news then played a brief clip of the terrorist as he gloated about destroying America.

"Susan?" Paul asked, not even trying to mask the fear growing in his voice.
"Honey, you still there?"

"Paul?"

"Stay where you are, I'm coming to get... hello? Susan? Hello?"

But the phone line was dead.

Paul rushed for his Blackberry that was charging next to the couch and saw then that he had close to ten missed calls, all from Susan. Frantically, he dialed her back. But nothing happened.

"Come on," he shouted, holding the phone above his head in the hope that he might catch a signal.

He studied the cell display and saw there were no bars. The thing was now a four-ounce paperweight.

On TV came scenes of more American cities devastated by nuclear explosions.

"Authorities are advising people in areas along the coast to head inland." The anchor glared at Paul through the screen. "For everyone else, if you have a safe place, we suggest you go there now."

Numb with disbelief, Paul couldn't help feeling strangely detached, as though he were standing outside of his body, observing a middle-aged man in wet overalls staring at someone else's television screen.

For close to ten years his crazy father-in-law Buck had been on and on about hyperinflation and the imminent collapse of the American economy. Far from the gluttony of Wall Street fat cats doing them in, America had just been attacked. It was starting to look as though many of the major port cities in the country had just been destroyed in a spectacular coordinated attack. Untold millions were already dead with many more to follow.

Paul drew in a long wheezy breath, the fingers of each hand gripping phones that were now silent.

That was when the power went out.

Chapter 4

Paul was frantically searching for a flashlight when he caught the sound of a truck pulling into his driveway. If he had any doubts about who had just arrived, the tread of heavy army boots mixed with a plethora of colourful curse words clomping up to his front door made the situation clear. His father-in-law Buck had arrived.

The front door opened and closed with a bang. "All right, gang. Get your stuff together. It's show time!" Buck's booming voice echoed throughout their small house.

Susan's father had a detailed bug-out plan not only for himself but for his extended family, which was to say Paul, Susan, and Autumn. Buck's wife had left him nearly a decade ago, claiming irreconcilable differences, since both of them had taken to fighting like cats and dogs for years. Crusty, stubborn, and cantankerous, Buck had a special way of making the people around him feel insane. No, his wife hadn't taken off to be with another man. She'd apparently run away to become a nun, locking herself away in a monastery somewhere in upstate New York only to contract breast cancer and pass away within a year.

Still without a flashlight, Paul came charging around the corner and directly into the beam cast by Buck's Maglite. Buck was in full military fatigues and when he took a step forward the clink of metal accompanied him. His muscled and powerful arms stood out in stark contrast to his belly, which pushed against his camouflage shirt. But Buck's most distinctive features were his bushy white hair and matching beard. Squat and powerful, he had "bad Santa" written all over him.

Buck raised a foghorn into the air and let off a blast. The blaring sound forced Paul's hands over his ears in an almost involuntary reaction.

"We don't have any time to waste," Buck shouted. "I got the wagon out front with room for the three of you and a suitcase each. For the love of God, Paul. Tell me you've been watching the news. Tell me you've seen what those ragheads have done this time."

"I was right before the power went out," Paul told him, his ears still ringing. Things were happening so fast now, it was hard for Paul to know whether this was all some kind of strange dream.

But wasn't this precisely the kind of nightmare he'd always dreaded? A natural disaster followed by Buck bursting through the door and trying to take control of the situation.

Buck planted an army boot on the bottom riser as though he were about to head upstairs. "I don't understand what's taking them so long."

"Probably the fact that Susan and Autumn aren't here, Buck."

Buck's entire body grew rigid. "Pardon me?"

"Susan flew down to Atlanta yesterday to help put the finishing touches on Autumn's apartment."

Buck was shaking his head in disbelief. "You sent your wife and daughter down there alone?"

"What you talking about?"

The old man's voice was starting to rise. "It's your job to protect them, Paul."

"My job to... This isn't the nineteen fifties anymore, Buck. I don't tell my wife what she can and can't do, nor does she need to be escorted everywhere she goes. Not only that, but Autumn's an adult now."

"Terrorists have attacked our country and killed millions of Americans and you sent my only daughter and only grandkid a thousand miles away because you couldn't be bothered to do your manly duties?"

"That's it, Buck, I've listened to just about enough of this," Paul shot back. "Do you really think I would've sent them off if I'd known this was about to happen? Do I look like some psychic medium?"

"I've been telling you for years something like this was on the cusp."

"Yes, you've been preaching for close to twenty years now that the sky was gonna fall down and by some coincidence it has, congratulations, but that doesn't make you smarter than the rest of us. Now if you'll get out of my way I'm gonna throw some things together so I can go get my wife and daughter."

Buck poked a thumb over his shoulder. "In that Volkswagen larva of yours?"

"Volkswagen Beetle. It's a hybrid."

Buck laughed. "It can run off farts for all I care. The highways are gonna be clogged with folks trying to leave the cities. You ain't gonna make it a hundred miles from here."

"You bet I will." Whatever hatred Paul had had for the old man was growing more and more pronounced by the second.

"I ain't kidding, Paul, and I don't mean no disrespect, but you aren't equipped to get them back safe and sound. You and I have had our differences over the years, ain't no denying it, but I think the one thing we agree on is how much we love Susan and Autumn."

Paul's arms fell to his sides. "So what are you trying to say?"

Buck's chin dropped. "I'm saying that you're not going there alone. And we're definitely not taking that thing you pass off as a car."

Chapter 5

What Buck liked to call his “Rumbler” was really a second-hand Hummer he’d found on Craigslist two years ago. The bright yellow vehicle might be an eyesore, but it was the grille on the front bumper which was the old man’s true pride and joy. He often complained that bumpers nowadays weren’t what they used to be. They were plastic with a high glossy finish. The slightest nick would send you to the body repair shop for an expensive fix and a hefty increase in your insurance premiums. Nah, a little fender-bender for Buck was only a problem for the other guy’s car.

True to its name, they rumbled down Church Road doing well over seventy miles an hour, Buck weaving through the growing congestion as the panic began to set in. With several American cities in ruins and the power grid apparently shut down, it wouldn’t be long before the rest of the country began to starve. Paul had spent enough time listening to Buck’s sermons on the end of the world to know that most big cities didn’t have much more than two to three days’ worth of food. The big surprise was how most of the food arrived on eighteen-wheelers and beyond that from the sea ports on either coast. Now, with an untold number of those entry points either blocked or destroyed, the chances of enough food imports getting through was next to nil. Before long the country would resemble those camps in Africa with folks forced to gather near designated drop-off points, scratching and pummeling each other for a bag of rice.

Perhaps the smartest thing for everyone was to leave the cities and head for the safety of the country. Urban areas contained the world’s greatest conveniences, but as soon as the power went out they could also become deathtraps.

Buck veered off Church onto 226th Street before hitting a dirt road.

“Where are we going?” Paul asked.

“You don’t expect us to head there as is, do you?” Buck asked, eyeing Paul with the leading edge of a grin. “This ain’t gonna to be no daytrip. We’re gonna need supplies, food, water and most important, some weapons.”

“Weapons?”

Buck reset the ball cap on his head. Underneath his linen-white hair was matted down under a ring of sweat. “Damned right. You’re gonna have to be realistic with what’s out there. A SHTF-type scenario has a funny habit of bringing the worst out in people. If you got it, you can be sure someone else is gonna want it and I ain’t giving it up without a fight.”

“This isn’t some *Dirty Harry* movie,” Paul said, feeling the situation was quickly getting out of hand. “I won’t argue we need some form of protection, but I don’t want this to turn into an excuse to shoot everyone who comes up to us looking for help.”

Rows of corn flickered by. “You ever fired a gun, Paul?” Buck asked without taking his eyes off the road.

“Sure I have.”

“I’m not talking about plugging holes in paper targets. Have you ever shot a man?”

“Of course not. Have you?”

He didn't reply, but one of the old man's eyebrows was cocked, implying he hadn't only shot a gun, he was a lethal weapon. Maybe back in the day when he'd served as a ranger in 'Nam.

"If someone tries to take what we have or hurt the ones I love, mark my words, I will not hesitate to take them down."

Paul shook his head, knowing where this conversation was headed. "I'm not arguing that we shouldn't defend ourselves or our family if they're facing some imminent threat. All I'm saying is that taking another man's life shouldn't be done lightly."

"I've seen your type before," Buck said. "During the war they came in all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed talking peace and restraint, and let me tell you, those poor saps were usually the most trigger-happy of all. This fancy talk of valuing life is nothing more than a smokescreen for polite society denying our true nature. If there's a threat, I'll take 'em out, no questions asked. No guilt. It's just that simple."

Paul studied his hands as the Hummer raced up the dirt road at high speed. "There's a fine line between self-defense and murder. I just hope you can tell the difference if the time comes."

Chapter 6

A few minutes later the yellow Hummer skidded off the road and stopped before a makeshift gate. On it were various warnings about guard dogs and trespassers being shot on sight. This was the beginning of the driveway which led to Buck's house. A little further on they came to another sign, which gave Paul a chuckle every time he saw it, and might have today if his gut hadn't been stitched into knots.

"What part of NO TRESPASSING don't you understand?" the sign read.

At last they came to a final sign just as Buck's house came into sight. This one laid things out in even starker terms.

"Violators will be shot. Survivors will be shot again."

As far as Paul was concerned, anyone who didn't heed these warnings was either blind or crazy, or both.

Buck lived on a ten-acre farm, only a small portion of which grew soybeans. The rest of the land lay fallow and Paul could only imagine that Buck intended to make use of it at some later date. At the end of the driveway was Buck's unimpressive house: a single-story lime-green bungalow with a detached two-car garage. It looked cheap and prefab. To the left of the house was a growing collection of used cars, rusted farming equipment, and bits and pieces of just about anything you could imagine. In another few years, Buck's property would begin to look more like a junkyard than it did a home.

But Paul had been married into the Baker family long enough to know that appearances could be deceiving. Most of the money that Buck got now from his veteran's pension went into building the bunker which sat somewhere on the property. In fact, the house itself was nothing more than a ruse designed to trick thieves and criminals into moving on to more lucrative prospects.

Paul had never seen the inside of Buck's bunker. All he knew were stories that Susan had told him over the years. Buck had been prepping this place for the end of the world for the better half of the last decade.

After hopping out of the Hummer, Buck waved for Paul to join him. "Going to need your help loading the truck, Rock Star."

Paul frowned. "Rock Star" was the derogatory nickname Buck had given him the first day the two men had met. It was never clear whether the source of the old man's disapproval had come from the fact that Paul was originally from New York City or whether it was because Paul had been a musician in a rock band. Growing up with musical parents had predisposed Paul to an affinity for the arts. His father, a concert pianist, and his mother, an opera singer with the Metropolitan, had fostered a love of music in the boy from a young age. But the idea of following in their footsteps had never occurred to him.

From a very young age Paul liked to do things in his own way and in his own time. For that reason he'd taken up the electric guitar and taught himself how to sing. A group he'd started in high school called the Rubber Band had been nothing to write home about, but it had helped him refine his abilities as a young musician.

Following high school, after he'd drifted apart from the original group of friends who'd been part of the band, fate had come knocking. Well, truth be told, he had been the one to do the knocking. He'd responded to an ad on a university pin board for a local band that was looking for a singer. The group had been called The Wanderers and Paul's style had fit with them seamlessly. Observers had said it was as though the four men had been together forever.

In a way this had been Paul's first marriage, and like many marriages in the modern era, it would eventually dissolve in bitter disputes. But back then, finding an outlet for his musical passion had been a tremendous discovery and it wasn't long before late-night gigs in seedy bars had led to a tentative record deal and before long a hit on the top one hundred. *Take Me All the Way* was the title of the breakout song which had whisked them all over the world. There was no way Paul could've known at that time that The Wanderers would be little more than a one-hit wonder, nor that their manager would do his utmost to steal as much of their money as he could.

When he'd met Susan backstage at one of their concerts in Omaha, her dazzling green eyes had stopped him dead in his tracks. It was only later that he'd learned of her young husband's recent death, the two of them not much older than twenty-two or twenty-three. Paul was himself twenty-four at the time and in many ways felt like he was going on forty-four.

Susan's first husband, a young Marine named Kevin Thorpe, had been the apple of Buck's eye and after his untimely death, there was little hope that a guy like Paul would ever measure up.

To say that Paul and Buck had never gotten along was something of an understatement. The two men just didn't operate in the same universe, couldn't see the world through the other's eyes. Needless to say, for Susan and Autumn's sake, they kept things civil, but the tension between them had been there from the beginning and pressed down like a weight whenever the two men were in the same room. In Buck's eyes, Paul was an East Coast hippie liberal while to Paul, Buck represented the personification of "shoot first and ask questions later."

The booming sound of Buck's palm slamming against the hood of the car jerked Paul from his reverie. "Snap out of it, Rock Star, we ain't got time to lose."

As much as Paul hated to admit it, Buck was right. They needed to load the Hummer with supplies and head out as soon as possible. If Susan and Autumn weren't already in danger, with the breakdown of law and order, they soon would be.

The very thought was terrifying. So terrifying that Paul didn't completely understand why the two men weren't already on the road. Why did they need supplies and weapons and ammunition when time was such a vital factor? The drive that lay ahead of them was close to a thousand miles, but wasn't that all the more reason to head out ASAP? Surely anything they needed they could pick up along the way from somewhere.

Paul jumped out of the car and for a second an image flashed before his eyes—Susan and Autumn cowering in a corner of her new apartment while a man with a giant hunting knife inched toward them. It was his imagination acting up, he knew that, but it made every second that they delayed feel like hours.

Chapter 7

"You just don't get it, do you, Paul?" Buck was saying as they entered the front door of his house. "If we run off half-cocked, we won't make it two hundred miles."

Paul ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair. "Gas for the truck, maybe a pistol and a bit of food. That's all we need, Buck. I'm starting to feel like letting you talk me into this was a mistake. I should never have agreed to come here."

"A mistake? Really?" Buck was staring at him dead on, the old man's brown eyes faded like the baseball cap he seemed to never take off his head. "What do you know about radiation?"

Paul didn't answer. Like so many of Buck's questions, it had a rhetorical quality.

"Well, let me tell you, Mr. College-Educated New York City Boy, because I think you're failing to see the magnitude of the situation. We've got less than ninety-six hours to find Susan and Autumn in the chaos that'll be raging down there in Atlanta and bring them back home."

"Ninety-six?"

"That's how long it'll take for the prevailing winds to push the radiation from those nuclear bombs inland. Fact, it may even take less than that. It's a nasty way to die, let me tell you," Buck said, rubbing his lips. "It's something you can't see, can't smell. Only sign it's starting to kill you is a nausea worse than any food sickness you've ever had."

"First you throw up a few dozen times. Then you start bleeding from the gums, nose, mouth, and backside. I can assure you, that's not the kinda sight you wanna see looking down at your business in the toilet. Ain't no Imodium on earth that can help you with that problem. Before long, clumps of your hair start falling out. You got a nice crop on your head for a man your age, Paul." Buck motioned. "Would be a real shame to see that fine coif fall out overnight. But by that point, if you're not already dead, then the flu-like symptoms induced by radiation sickness should finish you off. Believe me when I tell you, if you make it that far, you'll be begging for someone to put a bullet in your brain."

Buck opened a closet and handed Paul a yellow rubber hazmat suit.

Paul took it.

But Buck wasn't done. "See, we don't know exactly how many of our cities have been hit, but one thing is certain. Once that radiation begins to move, you're gonna thank your lucky stars that you listened to old Buck. That we took the time to gather the supplies we needed. So if I tell you that we need stuff, you're just gonna have to take the word of someone who knows, for once in your miserable life."

Neither man said a word as Buck plucked out another containment suit from a chest in the living room. He then turned and led Paul through the kitchen and out the back sliding door.

His two Dobermans, Princess and Roscoe, were barking madly, as if they could sense their owner's energy. They charged out, only to be yanked back when their chains drew short. They were both tied to a tree, a fact that Paul was thankful for.

"What're you gonna do about the dogs when we're gone?" Paul asked. They were heading toward the barn behind Buck's house.

"I'll get Sam Rafearty to feed and give 'em water while we're gone."

"Doesn't he run the Greenwood junkyard?"

Buck pulled open the barn doors, the dogs yelping less than twenty feet away. "He might not be up to your social standards, but he's a good man and I trust him."

That wasn't what Paul was insinuating, but he didn't bother to argue. Buck was the kind of man where if you took issue with every rude thing he said, you'd be fighting from dusk till dawn. No wonder Susan's mother, Kay, had decided that enough was enough.

The barn was modest, the floor covered by a layer of straw. Backed against the far wall was an old tractor. Buck went to the left of the vehicle and began swiping the ground with his boot, clearing away a patch of straw. On a wall nearby was a Confederate flag. The thumbtack holding one corner had come loose and it hung limply waiting for gravity to pull it to the ground.

Buck grunted and kept shifting the dirty straw until a metallic trap door appeared. Gripping the stainless-steel ring by the end, Buck yanked it open and exposed a wooden staircase leading down into darkness.

"I'd say ladies first," Buck snickered. "But I know you're afraid of the dark."

And with that Buck climbed down and disappeared from view. "You coming?" he called up when he reached the bottom.

Reluctantly, Paul followed him, the steps bowing and creaking under his weight. Buck probably outweighed him by thirty to forty pounds and yet the old guy seemed to have the agility, even at sixty-three, that Paul, a man in his early forties, couldn't match. Maybe there was something in those soybeans he seemed to like so much.

Much to Paul's surprise, the bunker under Buck's house was far more impressive than he had imagined. Three bedrooms, a living room, fully functional kitchen and working bathroom. Everything a family would need to ride out the end of the world.

Buck explained that he'd built one room for himself, one for Paul and Susan, and the third bedroom for Autumn. For a moment Paul was touched that Buck had included him in his survival plans, until he saw the two single beds in the room he was supposed to share with Susan and the nearly six-foot distance between them. Even after twenty years of marriage, Buck still seemed to struggle with the idea that his daughter slept in the same bed as another man. Especially when that man was Paul.

Buck tossed a heavy pink knapsack at Paul, who scrambled to catch it.

"The hell is this thing?" Paul asked, setting it on the floor beside him.

"Your bug-out bag," Buck shot back, throwing him another. "I made one for each of us in the event that the SHTF."

"So everyone gets green camo pattern but me?"

Buck let out a wheezy laugh. "I thought you artist types liked pink."

Funny man, Paul thought as he brought each of the backpacks over to the stairs and set them down along with the two hazmat suits.

Buck explained that each of the bags contained essential supplies, such as food in the form of MREs or meals ready to eat; needles, thread, and bandages for wounds; matches; two pairs of dry socks; water bottle and purification tablets. The list of course had gone on and Buck was happy to rattle through it at length before Paul cut him short, reminding him of the urgency of their mission.

The bunker itself was laid out in a rectangular pattern with a hallway that ran the length of the structure. Each of the rooms were set off to either the left or the right. At the end of the corridor was a locker that stretched from floor to ceiling. A combination padlock kept the locker's contents safe and Buck entered the code before opening the door.

The sight that greeted Paul's eyes wasn't the least bit shocking. The locker was stacked with a number of rifles and pistols. Crammed at the back Paul even noticed the edge of a crossbow.

"I'd love to take it all," Buck said, "but that just wouldn't be feasible. We need to travel light and not be weighed down by too much firepower. Since you ain't never fired a gun, I'm gonna give you a Ruger .22 bolt-action rifle and a pistol with the same caliber. You keep 'em on safety at all times and pointed at the ground until God forbid you need to draw. But if it comes to that, I need to know you'll be willing to put a man down."

Buck had a flair for the dramatic when it came to the loves of his life, his guns. But in this case Paul could see the old man meant business.

"If it comes to that, I'll do what I need to," Paul replied.

Nodding with rare approval, Buck stuffed the guns into a duffel bag along with a shotgun, Walther 9mm, his AR-15 and several boxes of ammo for each.

The amount of weapons seemed like overkill to Paul, but he knew better than to question it. If he was lucky the guns would sit in that duffel bag during the entire trip to Atlanta and back. It wasn't that Paul disliked guns. He trusted himself enough to be cautious about their application, but that trust didn't extend to everyone else, especially a guy like Buck, who seemed eager to plug holes in anyone who stood in his way.

As they were hauling gear up out of the bunker and stacking it beside the Hummer, the old man explained how he'd outfitted the bunker with filters to protect against radiation and biological warfare. In the past, Paul might've listened politely. But now, with the fear of nuclear fallout a reality—hard as that was to believe—the subject took on a new fascination.

As much as he hated to admit it, if Susan and Autumn had stayed in Greenwood instead of running off to Atlanta, they might have all spent time in the relative safety of Buck's underground stronghold. At least to ride things out until the worst of it had passed. But at the same time, Paul had to remind himself of the reality of the situation. As much as he wanted to keep his family safe, the thought of spending days, weeks or even months locked underground with Buck was a different kind of radiation poisoning. So too was the prospect of travelling with the cranky old man halfway across the country.

That was how much Paul loved his wife and daughter. And in his own way, so too did Buck, even if he had one hell of a strange way of showing it.

Chapter 8

Another precious hour slipped by as the two men loaded supplies into Buck's Hummer. Propane camping stoves, pots, and pans. A box of MREs that looked like they'd sat on some shelf for years waiting for the right day. Of all the kit, what nearly broke Paul's back was the ten-gallon water cooler. Buck hadn't given it more than a quick rinse before he began filling it with water and the sight had nearly made Paul's stomach turn. It didn't take more than a quick look around to see the squalor and filth that Buck had become accustomed to, a reality that was a universe away from how Paul lived his daily life.

In his world, the old adage about cleanliness being next to godliness wasn't too far off. As they loaded the rusty pots and pans and the dirty water into the truck, all Paul could think about was the bigger picture—saving his wife and daughter. He just pictured their faces and blocked everything else from his mind.

Once the guns, bug-out bags, and food supplies were on board, Buck made a final trip down into the bunker to retrieve the last few remaining items. If it hadn't felt real before, seeing these last few things nearly made the blood freeze in Paul's veins. Looped through Buck's arms were a number of gas masks. In his other hand was an object that Paul didn't recognize at first: a box with a very distinct black handle. It was when Buck drew nearer that he saw exactly what it was.

A Geiger counter.

Seeing all of this made Paul's mind go to the unimaginable conditions facing tens of millions living near the blast sites.

At last, Buck filled the jerry cans that were strung along the back end of the truck. This was by no means a guarantee that they wouldn't need to refill at some point, but the idea was to get as far as possible on what fuel they already had. There was no telling the state that the country would be in between Nebraska and Georgia. It was a daunting thousand-mile stretch no matter how you cut it, but with a country reeling from a historically unparalleled attack, there was no way either man could be sure of what they would encounter.

Soon enough, the Hummer sped away from Buck's one-story bungalow. He'd been careful to move his remaining guns and valuables down into the bunker before hiding the trap door under that litter of straw. "Hide in plain sight," that was his motto. "Make them think you live in a junkyard and thieves will skip to the next sucker down the line. Every man for himself."

Clearly that philosophy had guided Buck for many years. It was an attitude, as far as Paul was concerned, that had led to the dissolution of his thirty-year marriage and to his alienation from his neighbors.

Even out here in Nebraska, where your neighbor's house might be separated from yours by more than a mile of barren fields, Buck still managed to piss people off. The old man had done such a good job of driving people out of his life that there was

hardly anyone left to give him a dose of reality. In his mind, he was the only one seeing clearly. The entire US government was filled to the brim with corrupt politicians and bureaucrats all of them itching to stick it to the common man at every opportunity.

Paul poked a hand into his pocket and came out with his Blackberry. The reception bars on the top right were still flat, which meant that he didn't have a signal. It'd been that way since he'd lost contact with Susan earlier in the day, which seemed now like days ago. Following 9/11 the cell and landline circuits had been so overloaded that it had been nearly impossible to place a call. Paul figured that the same thing was happening now.

With dwindling hope, he dialed Susan's cellphone and hit the green call button. He waited several agonizing moments studying the screen as the Hummer bounced around over country roads. Not long after, he realized the futility of the exercise. He prayed silently for them to stay safe and stay put while he and Buck raced down to get them.

The only problem was, the more he tried not to think about it, the more those horrific scenes were playing out before his mind's eye. Soon, Paul's heart was hammering in his chest. His lungs began to tighten, making the act of pulling in each breath a gargantuan effort. He turned and began rummaging through the bags they'd stacked on the seats behind them.

"What you doing?" Buck asked crossly.

"Where's my bag?" Paul demanded. His mouth was becoming dry, making it hard to speak.

"How the heck am I supposed to know? It should be back there somewhere. What you need it for anyhow? We haven't been on the road five minutes and you already got the munchies?"

Buck was making a jab at Paul's early days as a musician when the smoke from joints had been nearly as ubiquitous as oxygen. It didn't matter that Paul hadn't smoked in years. "I need my heart pills."

Buck grumbled in the front as Paul rummaged through a heap of duffel bags, all of which seemed to be black and featureless. It was only after switching on the light above that he spotted his blue Rocktile knapsack.

Trembling, he jerked open the zipper and fished around until his fingers found the reassuring edges of that little plastic bottle. He slid back into his seat, reconnected his seatbelt and popped open the lid.

"Xanax?" Buck said, sneering with disgust. "I knew you were a dope head."

"I'm not a dope head, Buck. I've got a condition and this was what the doctor prescribed. I don't take them often, but if ever I was justified in doing so, this would be the time. Not that I need to explain myself to you."

Buck didn't say a word, but it was clear enough what he was thinking.

Paul washed down the pill with a sip from a bottle of water he'd brought from home.

As his heart started to slow, Paul spotted a lone figure standing on the edge of his property. He asked Buck to slow down and the old man complied, cursing under his breath as he did so.

"I don't want nothing to do with that man," Buck spat. "He's nothing but a damned liar and a cheat."

"Just let me do the talking," Paul told him.

The Hummer slowed to a stop next to Jarvis Taylor, a cattle farmer in his sixties who'd squabbled with Buck for years over a sliver of land between the two men's properties. At one time, Jarvis had built a barbed wire fence around his property to keep his cattle from wandering off. But part of it had apparently been on Buck's land and he'd knocked it right to the ground with the front end of a backhoe. A number of trips to small claims court had followed, in which Jarvis was forced to admit the strip of land wasn't his, although Buck was remanded to pay for the length of fence he'd destroyed. Neither man had been satisfied with the result and the consequences had been a long-standing feud.

Even as the window was going down, Paul could see that Jarvis was greatly disturbed, no doubt by the events that had transpired only hours before.

"I guess you heard," Paul said.

Jarvis stared blankly at him as he nodded, his hair skewed to one side, his chin bristling with unshaven hairs. "I'm worried we won't be able to recover this time," he said. "One city gone, that's a blow that hurts, but this many, I just don't..."

"Our country's been against the ropes before," Paul tried to tell them. "I'm sure those boys fighting in the Pacific after Pearl Harbor didn't think it could get any worse. Would have been hard for them to imagine that only a handful of years later we'd be knocking on Japan's doorstep."

"And those Japs got exactly what they deserved," Buck shouted over Paul's shoulder.

Jarvis nodded at this as well, as though for a moment, a temporary armistice had been declared between the two men. Even though Paul was far too young to know what might've been going through the minds of those young Marines and sailors back during World War II, he knew enough of history to recognize that if America did anything well it was bounce back from adversity.

"Stores are closed," Jarvis told them, glancing down the road in the direction they were headed.

"We're not going on a shopping run," Paul said. "Susan and Autumn are stuck in Atlanta and we're trying to get down there as quickly as possible. Get them home safe and sound."

Buck was surprisingly quiet at exactly the moment Paul had expected him to begin spewing about the coming social collapse and what America would look like once the rule of law was gone.

"Godspeed then," Jarvis said, nodding a final time as the window went up and the Hummer tore away.

They hadn't driven more than a dozen yards when Buck said: "Are you some kind of an idiot?"

"Excuse me?"

"Got wax buildup? I asked if there's a problem with your brain."

"Listen, Buck, your dispute with Jarvis has nothing to do with me."

"This isn't just about Jarvis. This is about you being in way over your head."

Paul was suddenly sure Buck was having a psychotic episode. "What the hell are you talking about?"

The old man's hand came off the steering wheel and chopped at the air above his head. "Way over and you just proved it. The minute I heard you let Susan and Autumn head to Atlanta on their own, I knew you had a screw loose. Then when you started flashing pills and blabbing to Jarvis I knew I was right. I should never have let you come."

The Hummer was doing nearly seventy on a backcountry road with a speed limit of thirty. Buck's hands were back gripping the steering wheel, his knuckles white with rage.

"Never have let me come?" Paul's blood was starting to simmer. "You've got your head rammed so far up your backside you think the wind smells like a giant fart, don't you? If there's anyone in this equation who's lucky it's you, because whether you like it or not Susan is my wife and Autumn my daughter. When you sent that collection agency to the house on Susan's birthday to retrieve the five hundred dollars you said she owed you, she swore she'd never speak to you again. And you know what, Buck, I was the one who told her to take a deep breath and think it over. Against my better judgment, I was the one who told her that blood was thicker than water."

Buck kept his eyes on the road, his face a mask. "Maybe you did all that and maybe you didn't. But the truth of the matter is, you don't tell people that you're leaving town. Might as well have nailed a sign to my front door. 'Come in and take what you want.' What do you think we're gonna come home to if it really hits the fan? I can tell you right now. There won't be a darn thing left. That's why you keep your mouth shut." Every word in that last bit Buck spoke as though it were its own sentence. "You're too trusting, Paul, and too damned naïve. And that's what got us into this mess in the first place."

"I feel bad for you, Buck, I really do. You live in this paranoid universe where every man, woman, and child is conspiring against you. Have you thought for a second that maybe part of your problem is you? Sure, maybe sometimes I'm a little too trusting, but at least I haven't cut myself off from the entire human race. 'No man is an island,' Buck. Ever heard that expression? I've never met a man who needed to hear it more."

After that, the two men fell into an uncomfortable silence, both breathing heavily as though they'd gone extra rounds in some sparring match. They hadn't been driving for more than a few miles and already they'd nearly torn each other to shreds. This was shaping up to be the road trip from Hell.

Chapter 9

In Atlanta, Susan Edwards stood staring out onto Edgewood Avenue. With the power out and no means of turning on the television, the noise from the growing crowd gathered outside was becoming louder and louder. At this stage, the mob wasn't demanding food and water, nor were they looting stores. All they demanded was information on what was going on. Although she couldn't see the riot police, Susan could hear them over the loudspeakers, asking people to remain calm and to return to their homes.

Less than an hour ago, Susan and Autumn had been outside with them. Most of the people gathered were students from Georgia State and so the two women had felt a certain amount of safety. They had gathered for the same reason that the demonstrators were still there; they wanted to know what was going on. At some point there was even talk of a march on the Mayor's office where they would demand to be heard. Surely if anyone in the city knew what was going on, it would be him.

The cops were telling people that it wasn't safe to be outside, that radiation levels would be on the rise and that they should return to their homes and wait for instructions from the authorities. Not surprisingly, this didn't sit well with most people. Waiting at home for the government to save you was practically a death sentence.

Perhaps the real reason for the march had been rumors about secret bomb shelters hidden somewhere underneath the Mayor's office. He was hiding there right now with his family and a lucky few handpicked followers. There was no way to prove any of this and the more Susan heard the talk as it circulated from person to person, the more she could see they were starting to take it as fact. It reminded her of that old adage that you could believe a lie if you told it to yourself often enough.

At one point the police had lobbed teargas into the crowd, and that was when Susan and Autumn had decided they'd had enough. They'd retreated to Autumn's new sixth-floor apartment, the one the two women had come here to decorate in the first place.

"We need to rent a car and get out of here," Autumn said from the kitchen. The fear in her voice was becoming more and more apparent. Her shoulder-length brown hair hung limply, her delicate features puffy, as though she'd been crying.

Susan had learned from her father long ago that losing yourself in panic was what made bad decisions seem like sensible courses of action. The allure was strong, stitched into our DNA over millennia, but the consequences were disastrous.

All you needed to do was look down at the surging crowd below as they tried to protect themselves from yet another wave of teargas. The police would eventually manage to disperse them, but how many would be hurt or killed before that was accomplished?

"We can't rent a car, Autumn," Susan said, glancing back at her daughter. In many ways, the two women looked nothing alike—Susan, tall and thin with fiery red hair and soft creamy skin; her daughter, several inches shorter, with an olive complexion and a sporty build. Autumn had decided on Georgia State after trying out and making the Panthers women's soccer team. She was a striker and hoped to someday turn pro and play in the National Women's Soccer League. The salary wouldn't be anything close to the men's pro sports franchises, but you could make a living and what did it matter when you were pursuing your passion?

For her part, in college, Susan had studied finance, but married young. First to Kevin Thorp as soon as they turned eighteen and then a couple years after his death to Paul. The birth of Autumn had sidelined her dreams of getting an MBA and working for one of the big banks. In the end, she'd gotten a job at the credit union, but her own shortcomings had fueled her commitment to see her daughter follow through. Up until now, Susan had done her best to ensure boys didn't get in the way. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that her daughter's goals would be dashed by something else entirely—an attack on their country so much worse than 9/11.

"There must be rental places that are still open," Autumn pleaded.

Susan turned, for good now. She was done looking out that window. "And how are we gonna pay?"

"You have money, don't you?"

In many ways, her daughter was becoming a woman, but in others, she still thought in childish ways. "I've got credit cards and an ATM card, but how do you expect me to use them when there's no power? Even if we could, I'm sure the banks have frozen everything to prevent people from liquidating their accounts."

"But they can't do that, can they?"

Susan went to her daughter and gently brought her to the couch. Outside they could still hear screams and shouts from the crowd. She looked down at her iPhone for probably the thirtieth time today and saw that she wasn't getting any signal. Something told her that this was the new reality and that the battery in her eight-hundred-dollar device would slowly drain away, never to be revived again. She turned it off to keep the charge as long as possible.

"You know I spoke with your father earlier, right before the signal died out. He told us to stay put, said he was coming to get us. I think that's exactly what we should do."

Almost on cue, the cacophony of sounds from outside grew louder and Susan wondered how long they'd be able to hold out before things got out of hand, and whether Paul had any real chance of reaching them.

Chapter 10

Buck and Paul were closing in on the two-hundred-mile mark and things were starting to look up. After sitting in silence for a while, watching endless rows of corn flicker by, the two men had started to talk. It was Paul who reached out first, not from any desire to concede the truth of any of the accusations Buck had flung at him. He was responding to the voice of his deceased mother who seemed to always whisper into his ear whenever he faced a difficult situation.

He could still picture her standing by the Steinway piano, singing softly while his father played Verdi's *La Traviata*. "Anger is just another way of calling for help," she liked to say. Paul wasn't entirely sure Buck wanted or needed any help, but if they were going to be sitting beside one another for the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours, it behooved them to at least act civil.

The conversation had started out awkwardly enough, with Paul talking about the weather. A bout of late August heat was sweltering outside. To conserve fuel, they weren't using the air conditioning and instead had the windows down. At Paul's feet was the Geiger counter, which he turned on every so often at Buck's urging to check radiation levels. It was a CVD-715, an old Civil Defense unit from the Cold War, powered by a single D battery. Paul flipped the switch and turned the knob to X10 as instructed by Buck. The needle jumped and then settled at the number two.

"Is that high?" Paul asked.

Buck nodded. "It ain't good. I'd be more comfortable if it were less than one."

Setting the device at his feet, Paul went for the radio, turning through the radio dial, listening to static.

"I'm not as useless with guns as you think I am," Paul offered, still hoping to find a signal and some much-needed news.

Buck glanced over briefly and grunted.

"Sure, I grew up in New York City, but an uncle on my father's side owned a farm about an hour out of Manhattan. We used to head up there for the weekends once in a while. Mother wasn't much for the rustic life. She'd come from a long line of diplomats." Paul saw he was losing the old man. "Anyway, somehow my uncle helped convince my father to buy me a Daisy BB gun for my birthday. You know, the one with the lever at the bottom you needed to cock."

"Winchester 94 replica."

"Yeah, that's it. I was told I could only shoot paper targets. See, the gun stayed at the farm and if I was good, they'd let me take it out whenever we visited. I was supervised at first, since everyone knew that guns were dangerous, whether or not they shot real bullets. But after a few visits the rules started to slacken. You know how it goes. Mom, Dad, and Uncle Paul were in the house, drinking wine, laughing at jokes I was too young to understand. And there I was plunking away at my targets when along comes this big fat rabbit hopping around, like it was trying to tease me. It was practically screaming: 'Betcha can't hit me. Betcha can't hit me.'

"That's when I had a real bright idea. I knew exactly what we should have for dinner that night. I swung my Daisy around, laid my sights over that little bugger and squeezed the trigger. I must have hit it square in the head 'cause it stopped moving. Went right over and picked it up by the back legs, brought it into the house with the biggest grin on my face. Rifle in one hand, rabbit in the other. I felt like a real man, providing for his family."

The hint of a smile was beginning to form on Buck's face. "I think I know where this is going."

"My mom was the first one to scream. 'You killed Mr. Fluffy,' my uncle cried."

Buck's big belly began to gyrate with laughter. "Mr. Fluffy." Stories that highlighted wimpy city folk crying over hunting and eating wild meat were right up his alley.

Paul was cackling too now. "I can't believe you killed Mr. Fluffy," he repeated. "Oh, boy, was my uncle pissed." Paul wiped tears of laughter from the edges of his eyes. "Lost my Daisy and haven't fired a shot since. So I guess that makes me a certified killer."

"*First Blood*, part zero." Buck could barely get it out as his thick arms swerved to stay on the road.

They were both still chuckling when the Hummer passed a black sedan pulled off on the side of Interstate 29. In the split second before they rocketed past, Paul saw a mother and her daughter standing a few yards off the road, using a broken umbrella for shade against the blazing sun. This was farm country and along this stretch trees were few and far between. A man stood near the back of the sedan flashing a sign which read, "Out of Gas."

Paul swiveled in his chair and watched them before they disappeared. The mother and daughter made him think of Susan and Autumn.

"I think we should go back," Paul said.

"Go back for what?" That crotchety look was back.

"To help those people, Buck. It's sizzling out there. Didn't you see he had a wife and kid?"

"We don't have enough for ourselves as it is."

"Well, I'm not saying we should fill his tank to the brim, but maybe we coulda stopped and at least given him enough to make it there himself."

"We've been lucky so far, Paul. Not sure if you realize that or not. I expected these highways to be swarming with people heading for whatever they thought of as safety. That family back there, before long they're just gonna be the tip of the iceberg, mark my word."

"So what? They needed our help. If you were stuck with an empty tank, wouldn't you want someone to lend a hand?"

Buck tore off his cap and used his forearm to wipe sweat off his brow. "If I'm dumb enough to be caught with my pants down like that, then I deserve whatever I get. They don't call it prepping for nothing, Paul. Most of these folks don't know the first thing about living off the grid and making ready for the worst. Just you wait. I'm telling you. Things are gonna get a whole lot worse before they get better."

"You ever heard of karma, Buck? What goes around comes around?"

"Do you want to save your wife and kid or not?" Buck shot back, an angry hue forming in his puffy cheeks.

"Of course I do, but how can we call ourselves Christians and just pass them by?"

Buck cocked an eyebrow. "You ain't a Christian."

"What do you mean?" To Paul, faith was a personal thing, but being called out by a man who couldn't be bothered to help a fellow human being in need couldn't go unchallenged. "Who are you to question me?"

"Were you baptised as a kid?"

Paul hesitated. "Not as a kid, but I don't see why that matters. I was raised by secular parents. They believed that music and art were God's fingerprint. Hey, we lived in New York City. Fact, I never even set foot in a church until I met your daughter. When things became serious, she asked if I'd become a practicing Christian. We had a ceremony where I was baptised."

"Susan never said anything about that."

"I'm sure she didn't. It was probably during one of those periods when the two of you weren't speaking. There's a lot about your daughter you don't know, Buck."

"Well, I know she lied to me."

"She withheld, it's not the same thing."

"It is as far as I'm concerned. Was bad enough you were a philandering rock star. If I'd known you were an imposter too, I'd have never allowed that marriage to take place."

Paul laughed sardonically. "In another life, you'd have made a fine dictator."

Buck glanced over, not entirely sure if it was a compliment or not.

They argued back and forth for several more minutes, Paul waiting the entire time for Buck's conscience to kick in and compel him to turn the Hummer around. But that didn't happen.

Chapter 11

A few miles on, Buck looked down at the fuel gauge and cursed under his breath. Glancing over, Paul saw that they were down to a quarter tank. Simple math made it clear they wouldn't get all the way to Atlanta without needing to refill, even with the jerry cans.

It was always better to fill up the main tank first and keep the rest in reserve in case they ran into problems. Buck had spent close to ten minutes explaining all of this to Paul as the latter searched through the assortment of roadmaps Buck kept in his glove compartment. A GPS would have made far more sense, but Buck was sure the government used them as tracking devices.

Paul's initial impulse to whip out his mobile phone and search on Google Maps for a service station died the minute he realized there was no more Internet. Tracing a finger along the map, he said: "All right, so we're on Interstate 29, heading south. Seems to me we're right on the outskirts of Kansas City."

"What's that over there?" Buck asked.

He was pointing at a sign which read: Platte City.

Paul had never heard of it, but it meant there was probably a gas station up ahead. Whether they could get any gas given the lack of power was another issue entirely.

"You sure you know where we need to go once we hit Atlanta?" Buck asked.

Paul fished into his pocket and produced a scrap of paper with Autumn's name and address written down in blue pen. "160 Edgewood, apartment 603. Corner of Edgewood and Piedmont Avenue. I wrote it down before we left. Like I said, I was there before to help her build more IKEA furniture than I care to see again."

Buck tsked. "You gave her that cheap foreign crap?"

Paul nodded. "It's her first place. She certainly isn't going to get anything from Hellman-Chang. Flew in about a week ago. Spent a long weekend, eating pizza and working our fingers to the bone. Susan stayed at home for that part. Not that she didn't want to help, but it was our schedules. We must have criss-crossed in the air afterwards. Me flying home and her heading to Atlanta to begin adding the feminine touches." Paul grew quiet for a moment. "Anyway, I'm sure if I we can find a map from this century then I'll be able to get us there. If you weren't so paranoid the government was tracking people through their GPS, this would have gone a lot smoother." He studied Autumn's address again, trying not to let the sentimentality get the better of him. After a moment he shoved it back into his pocket.

A short time later the traffic on the interstate had grown heavier. Most of the cars were heading out of the city, but even so, their numbers weren't nearly what Buck had predicted they would be. He'd sworn the cities would empty out as panic set in. He'd read articles and seen programs on TV about how when folks got scared they reverted to a herd-type mentality.

Paul didn't doubt there was some truth to Buck's assertion, but in that big ol' theory there was one thing he was forgetting. Fear could also keep people frozen in place. How many had needed to be rescued during Katrina because they'd refused to leave their homes? The roads were quietest right before and right after a storm.

No doubt things would pick up. But that wouldn't begin until folks began running low on food and water. They still probably believed that help was on the way.

The nuclear detonations that in a flash had obliterated millions of square miles and just as many lives didn't feel real for the majority of people living far from the coast. Few if any had seen any mushroom clouds or bright flashes of light. A few minutes of a breaking news report along with a major power outage was thus far the extent of their exposure. Things would get worse. But how and when?

Those thoughts were still making tight, frantic circles through Paul's head when he spotted a Gasmart and Phillips 66 station. They pulled off. Again, the light traffic flowing into the city meant all the pumps were free.

Buck hopped out and stretched his arms over his head till something popped.

"Oh, man, I needed that," he said. "My legs feel like they're getting stuck with pins and needles. Hate that." He walked in circles before leaning into the truck to pop the gas tank release. "Top her up, would you, Paul? I gotta leak something fierce." That was when Buck reached under the seat and pulled out a semi-automatic pistol, one that had a square muzzle and looked to Paul like a Glock.

"The heck you need that for?" Paul asked.

Buck slid it into the waistband of his jeans. "I'd feel more comfortable going in with my AR-15 if it wouldn't make folks wet themselves."

Paul shook his head, watching as Buck disappeared around the back of the service station. If that man wasn't careful he was going to get them killed.

After undoing the cap Paul grabbed the nozzle, inserted it and then squeezed the trigger. He held on for a full five seconds before he realized nothing was happening. His eyes scaled up the pump to the display which, predictably, he found blank. After he squeezed a number more times in rapid succession with the same disappointing result, Paul replaced the nozzle and headed inside. Surely there had to be another way to get gas.

The mid-afternoon sun mirror-shaded the Gasmart's windows, but nevertheless Paul could see an attendant inside. Just to the left of the convenience store were two garage doors. That meant there might also be a mechanic on site. In a worst-case scenario, maybe he might be able to suggest something about getting fuel. Thankfully, the Hummer wasn't bone dry. They still had a quarter tank as well as the jerry cans on the back. But if this was a hint of what lay ahead, they might never make it to Atlanta. That last thought weighed on his heart as he walked inside.

Two men sat behind the counter. Both of them looked like they might be mechanics. Paul stabbed a thumb over toward the Hummer, which the two men were already admiring.

"I know the power's out," Paul began. "But I was hoping there was some way we could get some gas."

"Gas?" the one nearest the cash register said as though he'd never heard the word before.

"Yeah, is there a way?"

The man waved him over. He was thin and his hair looked greasy and was flattened against his skull. "Pumps ain't working, but for the right price we may be able to help you."

"I'd be happy to throw an extra twenty bucks in for your trouble," Paul told him, grinning as he approached.

The two men looked at each other and laughed. "It's gonna cost you more than that, hombre," the other one said.

"That's right," Skinny said. "Runaway inflation."

Paul frowned. "So how much are we talking about?"

"For you," the skinny one said, flashing a mouthful of missing teeth, "let's make it ten bucks a gallon." When he spoke, the air passing through his mouth made a sharp whistling sound.

A quick calculation told Paul that it would cost nearly three hundred bucks to fill up. "That sounds a bit steep, don't you think?"

Both men shook their heads at the same time. "Not one bit, fact the price just went up to eleven bucks a gallon."

Paul realized the two men were having a good time at his expense. "All right, gentlemen, my friend and I are going to shop elsewhere. Sorry we wasted your time."

The skinny one was looking outside as Paul spoke. "That the friend you were talking about?"

Outside, Paul spotted Buck walking across the gas station parking lot toward the Hummer. Buck's hands were raised and behind him were three men wielding shotguns and pistols. Paul felt the blood drain from his face. He didn't even have time to utter a word of shock before he heard a click. He looked over, his eyes wide like saucers, to find the barrel of a .45 aimed at his face. On the other end was the skinny gas station attendant.

"Daryl," he said. "Go on and search that man for the keys to that Hummer." He glanced outside again. "She looks like a mighty fine ride."

Daryl did as he was told, pushing Paul up against the counter, rows of candy bars beneath him. He shoved his hands into Paul's left pocket and came away with his Blackberry. Then a hand jammed into his right and emerged waving the paper where Paul had written Autumn's address.

"This is all he's got," Daryl said, handing both to the skinny man. Tossing the phone aside, he flattened the scrap of paper on the counter, careful to keep the .45 on Paul. "Who's Autumn in Atlanta?" he asked, grinning. "That your girlfriend?"

Paul didn't say a word, but the skinny guy must have read the anger building behind Paul's eyes.

"That's a pretty name. Whoever she is, you love her a great deal. I can see it in your eyes. Don't ever think about becoming a professional poker player, 'cause that face of yours is like an open book."

Paul swallowed hard. He was fantasising about knocking the gun out of the skinny man's grip and using it to knock out his few remaining teeth.

"The fat one must have the keys," Skinny said, motioning to Buck outside as he rubbed the piece of paper between his fingers. "Bring him into the garage. We'll let Finch decide what he wants to do with 'em."

Chapter 12

Paul and Buck were forcibly moved at gunpoint into the gas station's garage and tied to the single piston of a raised hydraulic car lift. Extension cords were wrapped around them, tying both men to the piston, the way kids used to tie each other to trees when they played cowboys and Indians. Above them was a Dodge minivan without tires. Their faces and clothes were slick with oil dripping on them from the van's undercarriage. At the doorway stood one of the armed men who had captured Buck.

"Did you at least get a chance to do your business?" Paul asked, trying to take his mind off the image of the skinny man making threats against Susan and Autumn.

Buck grunted, which was as close to an acknowledgment as Paul was probably going to get.

Through the frosted garage windows they were just able to see the outlines of the other men going through Buck's Hummer. The doors and rear hatch were open and the contents from inside were being removed and inventoried. These guys didn't seem very worried about the cops showing up.

"We ain't got no beef with you," Buck told the man in the doorway. "Country's gone to hell in a handbasket and we're all in the same boat now. We do better looking out for the man next to us than stabbing him in the back."

Even Paul was surprised to hear Buck speak of community and cooperation. These were four-letter words to the old man. It could only mean he was buttering the guy up so they could make an escape.

The slick metal of the hydraulic piston was cold against Paul's skin and he couldn't tell whether this was the thing sending shivers up his spine or the idea that they were probably a few minutes away from being shot in the head.

Buck went to say something else when the man at the door told him to save his begging for Finch.

The guard at the door lowered the barrel of his shotgun and leaned his shoulder against the frame. He was wearing a blue coverall which was nearly identical to the ones worn by the two who had pulled a gun on Paul inside. Paul had assumed they were mechanics, but something about the rough way that they spoke, acknowledging each other with a "yes, sir" or "no, sir," as well as the experienced way they seemed to handle their weapons, told Paul that he was wrong.

It wasn't until a few minutes later as Paul's gaze passed over his now all-too-familiar surroundings that he saw the doorway toward the back of the garage. But it wasn't the door itself which caught Paul's attention. It was the trail of dark motor oil trickling out from under it that drew his eye. The more he studied that trail, the more he was gripped with horror. The stuff coming out of that room wasn't oil at all, it was blood.

"I see what you're looking at," the man in the blue coverall said. His hair was closely cropped. Peering out from the Vee of his one-piece outfit were a series of grotesque-looking tattoos. It was hard to tell from here, but none of it looked like

butterflies or unicorns. A grinning skull with muscle attached to bone was Paul's best guess.

Paul didn't reply.

"You wondering what's in here, ain't you?" the man said, approaching the door.

"What's going on?" Buck whispered.

The guy in the blue coverall was gripping the door handle, his eyes locked on Paul as he rattled it back and forth. "You wanna see what's in here?"

Paul's jaw fell open and he hoped his head was shaking vigorously that no, he didn't want to see what was in there, but in his growing terror, he couldn't be entirely sure what his body was doing.

But it didn't matter because the guy with the shotgun and coveralls opened it anyway and as he did Paul felt a scream clawing at his throat and threatening to burst past his lips. He bit down hard to hold it in, all the while unable to grasp what his eyes were seeing.

Inside the room was a stack of bodies—four, maybe five. It was hard to tell. Each of them wore nothing but underwear and undershirts which used to be white, but were now drenched in the liquids of death. Piled on top of them were orange jumpsuits.

Right away Paul began to put the pieces together. These weren't car mechanics who'd gone off their rockers and decided to take advantage of people during the darkest days of the Republic. These men were convicted criminals who had somehow managed to escape during the chaos. Men who were waiting to draw in what supplies and weapons they could before God knew what.

There was a good reason the man in the blue coverall had opened that door. And it wasn't just to scare the two of them. He was making a point, letting them know that their time here on earth was ticking down every second.

"Eckhart, close that damned door, will you?" a male voice shouted from the doorway. "You're stinking up the place."

Eckhart did as he was told.

Now Paul and Buck shifted their attention away from the gruesome scene to the man they could only assume was the leader of this gang. Was this the Finch they'd heard about? He was short, maybe five-five or five-six, with long tangled hair and wild eyes. His chin was covered in a short, matted beard, making him an almost dead ringer for Rasputin. But unlike the Russian seer, this man wore a light brown coverall that had short sleeves and Phillips 66 stitched above the right breast. Above the left was the name Pete. Something about the crazed look in the man's eyes told Paul his name wasn't really Pete. The Pete he knew helped walk old ladies across the road. This one looked like he'd rather slit their throats.

"We're just about done going through your truck," the new one said. "It seems at least one of you knows a great deal about survival and I wanted to thank you personally for the supplies you've donated to me and my men."

"Donated?" Buck cried. "We didn't donate nothing. You're a bunch of thieves."

The man reached into the pocket, plucked out a wallet and flipped it open. His eyes darted between the wallet and Buck.

"You're Buck, aren't you?" More flipping. "I see you're a proud member of the NRA. Isn't that nice."

Out came another wallet. This time the man studied the image before his gaze rose to meet Paul's.

"You know who we are," Paul said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I think it's only fair we know who you are."

The man grinned. "What, don't you recognize me?"

"Should we?" Paul replied, trying to buy time before the inevitable.

Buck tilted his head. "You sure do look familiar underneath all that hair."

"I'm sure I do. I hope you'll trust me when I tell you a shave and a haircut is one of my top priorities. My name is Staff Sergeant Finch."

Paul recoiled. There was no way this guy was military. He was either crazy or lying.

"I know who you are," Buck said, the edges of his white beard smeared with grease. "You were an instructor over at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, sent to Fort Leavenworth a couple years back for raping twenty-five female cadets."

That grin was back on Finch's face. "Twenty-eight, thank you very much. And I'm sorry to say that the two of you gentlemen aren't my type."

Fort Leavenworth was only a few miles from here, which meant the men must have just broken out.

Just then Paul felt Buck shift ever so slightly. Even though his eyes were glued on Finch, the old man's right leg was bent at an angle. There was something in his boot he was trying to get at. The other man, Eckhart, was looking over this way and Paul realized he needed to distract him.

"You didn't need to kill those men," Paul said.

"That wasn't me," Finch replied. "See, killing's not my thing."

That seemed encouraging enough, coming from a psycho rapist.

"You sound like a regular saint," Buck spat. "So when you gonna untie us?"

Finch smiled and this time the expression almost looked tender. That was when he turned and left the room.

Eckhart followed him out, which gave Buck the chance he needed to reach into his boot.

"What are you doing?" Paul whispered.

"Trying to get us out of here."

"Or get us killed."

"Did you see what they have stacked in that closet?" Buck growled. "Besides, I'm not about to let them take my truck."

"You're as crazy as Finch, you know that? I wasn't sure before, but now I am."

"If we don't get that Hummer back, we won't make it to Atlanta in time. And in a couple days from now that radiation's gonna come floating over and start melting people's faces right off."

Buck had such a wonderful way with words. The old man was still working to cut the knot when they heard a noise.

"Someone's coming," Paul told him, trying to keep his voice down.

Buck tossed the pocket knife a few feet from where he was tied.

"What'd you do that for?" Paul began, just as Eckhart reappeared.

"I told you two to shut up," he said, stepping into the garage. "If it wasn't for Finch, we woulda gutted you two long ago." Eckhart's eyes settled on the floor by Buck's feet. "That better not be what I think it is." He stormed over to the open pocket knife and reached down to grab it.

That was when Buck kicked his feet out from under him. The gunman swung in mid-air and came crashing down, the rear of his skull making a sick sound as it

thudded against the smooth concrete floor. The force of Eckhart's fall sent his shotgun skidding under one of the mechanic's red tool boxes in the corner of the garage.

After that, Buck and Paul struggled against the extension cord. Now that it was loose enough, all they needed to do was bring it up and over their heads.

They were nearly there when Finch came charging in, his eyes ablaze with rage. In a flash he lunged at Buck, at precisely the same moment the old man broke free from the cords. The two of them rolled around, fighting to grab hold of the other man's throat. Paul went to retrieve the shotgun under the toolbox when someone else entered the gas station.

Paul snatched the shotgun by the stock with the tips of his fingers, pulled it out and gripped it tightly. Without giving it another thought, he racked the weapon right as one of Finch's men came running in, a semi-automatic pistol in hand. Both men raised up at once and two shots rang out. A flash and a deafening sound echoed from each weapon. One of the glass panes behind Paul's head shattered.

Finch's man was thrown back against the wall, his chest torn open in a red mist.

Still shocked at what he'd just done, Paul looked over just in time to see Buck, his pocket knife in hand, swinging the blade down into Finch's left eye socket. Finch let out a thundering howl as he clutched the wound. Almost on cue a barrage of fire from outside tore through the thin garage door, filling the air with bits of glass and metal fragments. Paul and Buck dove to the ground as rounds ricocheted in every direction. There was an emergency exit over by the far wall. Paul pointed in that direction.

"It's our only hope," he hollered over the noise. "We'll never make it if we try rushing out the front door."

Buck nodded and the two of them made a break for it, slamming against the push bar and into the open air, escaping the smell of death and motor oil.

Chapter 13

Paul glanced over his shoulder as soon as they exited the garage. A handful of Finch's men stood by the Hummer, firing their weapons at the garage. Another group was moving toward the Gasmart entrance, probably intending to storm in and kill them once and for all.

When he looked back, Buck had already disappeared around the back of the service station. It looked like it was nothing but forest ahead of them, but Paul had spent some time studying the map during the drive and knew that if they cut through the woods, they would find a street and hopefully some houses. Surely by now someone—motorists or local residents—had heard the shots and was finding some way of contacting the police.

The two men stopped long enough to catch their breath, Paul clinging to the heavy shotgun, which seemed to be gaining weight by the second.

"What about the Hummer?" he asked when he caught up to Buck.

The old man was bent over, his hands on his knees, sucking in air like it was going on special. With his white bushy beard and overhanging belly, he looked like an overweight guy hitting the gym for the first time.

"There's no way we'd get within fifty feet before those boys cut us down," Buck said with genuine sadness in his voice. He loved that truck.

"We have nothing now, Buck. They took our supplies, weapons, even our darn wallets."

They started moving again. "Well, unless the power magically comes back on, our plastic money's as good as useless. I ain't worried about the cash, though, it's losing all that other stuff that's going to hurt bad."

Paul glanced down at his hands and saw that they were shaking. Buck noticed it too.

"I didn't think you had it in you," the old man said.

"Neither did I," Paul replied. "What do you think happened to Finch?"

"You mean, do I think I killed him?"

Paul shook his head. "To be honest, I'm not sure what I mean."

"All I can guarantee is he won't be getting much use out of that eye anymore," Buck said, proud of himself. "If we'd another few seconds alone, I woulda had time to slit his throat and finish that rapist for good." Something in the direction of the gas station caught his attention. "Come on, let's go. We're not out of this yet."

The two men charged through the heavy brush until at last they reached a narrow paved road. No sooner had they done so than they spotted a woman driving a Ford pickup heading in their direction. Buck stood by the side of the road waving his bloody hands, trying frantically to get her to stop. Fear bloomed on her face as she drew closer and she laid on the horn as she swerved to avoid Buck. He threw his arms up in frustration as she sped by. "What is this world coming to? A time when our country is facing the greatest crisis of its history and people can't stop to help those in need?"

Paul shook his head in disbelief at the old man's hypocrisy.

Not a moment later, they caught the sound of another truck, this one coming fast. Both men turned and stared at the same time. The Hummer appeared, like some demonic mirage, and they were gripped by the surreal quality of watching their own vehicle hunt them down.

“Quick,” Buck shouted. “We need to get off this road.”

Just ahead was a residential street in a row of houses where they could hide. The two men scurried in that direction, Paul keeping the shotgun close at hand in case they’d been spotted. He knew well enough that even with the weapon in his hands and the pocketknife Buck was carrying they wouldn’t stand a chance. All they could do now was hide and pray that Finch’s men didn’t find them.

Chapter 14

Susan stood staring bleakly at the near empty cupboard in Autumn's new Atlanta apartment. She was punishing herself for putting off the grocery run they'd planned earlier that morning. Indulging in some nice comfort food was the kind of luxury she tended to save for after the hard work was done. A carryover, perhaps, from growing up with a father whose main motivation in life seemed to be deferring pleasure for some time down the line. His interest in prepping, which had started about a decade ago, had quickly morphed from a passion to a full-blown obsession.

She understood the difficulty in only going partway down that rabbit hole. Either you prepped or you didn't. It was a complete lifestyle change in much the same way that some families decided to reduce their carbon footprint.

There really wasn't an aspect of one's life that wasn't touched by some aspect of prepping. When her father had begun building the bunker under his house, that was when she thought he'd gone too far. His lack of female companionship was the real culprit. Spending one's life planning for the possible breakdown of society had to play havoc with a person's stress levels. That nagging feeling that you never had enough, that there was always something you might have missed or overlooked. In this case, that was her and Autumn. She could just imagine how upset and afraid he would be arriving at the house to find no one there, no explanation from Paul that he'd jumped in the car and raced off to drive the hundreds of miles to get them.

But in many ways, she'd been grateful these last ten years that her father's obsession hadn't begun when she was young. For all intents and purposes her family life had been normal. Buck was Buck. Gruff and hard to approach, but always loving. His tongue might be sharp, but underneath his calloused exterior was a soft bear of a man who would rip the shirt off his back in a snowstorm if it meant saving the life of someone he loved.

She wondered where he was right now, what he was doing. But didn't she already know the answer? He was holed up in his bunker, activating whatever plan he'd devised for the day when a devastating crisis hit the country.

But that didn't seem quite like him, did it? Sitting in that glorified rat's nest under his house while the only remaining family he had was stranded far from home. No, more likely than not he would have come straight to the house. Hadn't he told her once he'd created an evacuation plan for the three of them in case, as he liked to put it, the SHTF?

That was when she'd asked: "What do you mean the three of us? What about Paul?"

He'd waved the question away. "There's only so much room."

"Yeah, well, whether you like it or not he's my husband, Dad. So if there isn't enough room, then make some. Or you can count us out."

Although that conversation had taken place several years ago, she'd never believed that the bunker would ever be completed, much less needed. Arguing for

Paul's inclusion had been done more on principle. She wasn't going to let her father's disapproval get between her and the man she loved.

In many ways, the two men couldn't be more different. Paul was creative, intellectual and didn't shy away from talking about his feelings. Her father preferred action to talk and was suspicious of anything emotional. And more and more these days, his tendency towards suspicion had branched out towards all kinds of unusual theories about his neighbor Jarvis Taylor plotting to poison his soybean crops, or how the federal government was planning to confiscate people's guns and stockpiling billions of rounds of ammunition in order to carry out their subjugation of the people.

Susan thought all of that was really just a smokescreen for the fact that he missed his wife, her mother, Kay. And maybe part of him was also still grieving over the death of Susan's first husband, Kevin. Killed in a road accident in Kuwait before Operation Desert Storm even began. Buck thought of him as the son he never had and in the same breath saw Paul as an imposter who could never hope to fill his glorious shoes.

The truth was her father had never really given Paul a fair shake. For all of her husband's soft, artistic exterior, he was her rock and at times could be just as stubborn and opinionated as her father. Paul was an unusual mix of what a man was supposed to be along with what a man could be—a friend as well as a lover and father to their child.

Slowly she came back to the present, frightening and uncertain. Paul had told her to sit tight, that he was on his way. But how long would that take, especially given the state of things? Not surprisingly, the only food in Autumn's apartment was a nearly empty box of Wheat Thins, some granola cereal, a touch of skim milk and one single serving of plain yogurt. Yuck.

No, this wouldn't do, not when they might be stuck here for the next few days. Thanks to a few tricks she'd learned from her father over the years, they'd already filled as many buckets and containers as they could with water. Even though the power had gone out, the taps were still running, although she couldn't say how much longer that would last.

The streets outside had also become quiet since the police and National Guard had managed to disperse most of the protesters. Either that, or they'd simply moved forward with their plan to march on the Mayor's office. Not that that would do them any good.

Still, two women heading out alone to find food was not a terribly safe situation. Autumn was in her bedroom taking a nap, which would give Susan a window of opportunity to go down the hall and see if any of her new neighbors would be willing to make a donation. They didn't need a lot. Just enough to last them a few more days. Hopefully not more.

The set of kitchen knives they'd purchased for the apartment were incredibly sharp and each came in their own plastic sheath. Susan took the longest one and slid it under the back of her waistband.

You never knew whether the person on the other side of that door would turn out to be helpful or psychotic. The knife was her insurance against the latter.

Chapter 15

Paul and Buck knocked on three doors before they found someone who would finally open. Maybe the neighbors had heard the sound of gunfire and were fearful. Or maybe knowledge of the nuclear bombs had triggered the desire to hunker down and wait for the government to signal an "all clear." By now even Paul had to admit any sort of government assistance wasn't very likely. It seemed that with every passing hour he was starting to sound more and more like Buck, a thought which both surprised and concerned him.

The house which finally opened for them was a quaint two-story grey structure with a wide wraparound balcony. A beat-up red pickup sat parked in the gravel driveway and sticking out the side of the slightly angled roof was a satellite dish. It was an old woman who answered and she seemed startled to see two men standing there, one of them burly and mean-looking.

Buck was the first to speak. "Listen, ma'am, we're sorry to disturb you, but we could really use your phone."

"Who is it, Teresa?" a man's voice asked from somewhere inside.

Teresa turned back and shouted, "Two men and they say they need the telephone."

"Phone's out," the man replied. "Same as everyone else's."

"The truth is," Paul cut in, taking a gamble, "we were attacked by a group of armed convicts and we need somewhere to hide."

"We're not hiding," Buck said proudly.

Outside, the sound of the Hummer made Paul's heart begin racing in his chest.

"I'm not so sure," she said, her husband emerging for the first time.

"I swear we don't mean any harm," Paul told them.

The truck was about to draw even with the street and once it did, the two men would be spotted for sure.

"You boys armed?" the man asked.

Paul nodded. "Yes, sir. We've got a shotgun, but I can empty all the shells out if you like."

Behind him, Buck didn't say a word. More likely than not he hated the idea of begging strangers for help, even if that might save their lives.

"All right, come on in," the man said. "I'm sure if the two of you meant us any harm we would have already seen it."

They entered as quickly as they could, Paul wiping his feet on the rug by the front door and then leaning the shotgun against a nook in the wall. Meanwhile, Buck closed the door, peering out at the street through one of the tiny square window panes.

"You see them?" Paul asked.

"They just rolled by real slow-like," Buck whispered. He snapped the ball cap off his head and pushed his hair back before sliding the cap back on.

The man stuck out his hand. "Name's Travis Wright. This here's my wife Teresa. Why don't you two gentlemen come inside?"

They did as Travis suggested.

"I'm sorry to put you folks through this," Paul offered, looking down at the tremble in his own hands. "We pulled into the Phillips 66 over by the interstate and got held at gunpoint."

"Oh, my," Teresa said, cupping her mouth, the skin on the back of her hand wrinkled and dotted with liver spots.

"Took everything we had," Buck added. "My Hummer, all our gear, supplies, even our weapons."

"You kept your shotgun," Travis noted, his arms crossed over his chest.

Paul nodded. "We took it from one of them." Then his eyes fell to the floor as the full implication of what he'd done hit him.

"It was them or us," Buck said. "I know it's hard to see that right now, but both of us did what we could."

"What you boys need is to get a hold of the sheriff," Teresa said, her head tilted up at her husband who was standing behind her.

Travis was tall and lanky with short-cropped grey hair and square spectacles. He looked like he'd once been a bank teller or a clerk of some kind. Rubbing his chin, he descended into deep contemplation.

Paul nodded at the suggestion of calling the sheriff. "That was what we had in mind, but the phones aren't working."

"And it's far too dangerous to head there on foot," Buck added, leaning forward as he sat on the couch, his large forearms resting against his knees.

"A phone won't be necessary," Travis said. "I've got a shortwave down in the basement attached to a car battery. Something of a hobby of mine and I know the sheriff's got one too. Can't say we'll have much luck getting through, since I'm sure they're a little overwhelmed at the moment, but it's certainly worth a try."

"That's great," Buck replied, displaying a rare smile. "Why don't you wait here, Paul, and keep an eye out."

Paul nodded absently. "Sure." The weight of taking another man's life didn't seem to bother Buck all that much. Finch had been squealing like a stuck pig as the two of them had fled, so there wasn't much chance that he'd died. But there was no telling what an infection would do if that wound went untreated.

The man Paul had put down with the shotgun was another matter entirely. He wasn't getting up, not ever again. Even Paul recognized that remorse was a strange feeling to have after gunning down a man who had had every intention of doing the same to him. Probably any court in the country would have absolved him of any guilt. But this wasn't just about man's laws—this was about a higher law. One he might have to violate again before their journey was done.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" Teresa asked him. By the look in her eye, it was clear that she could see he was suffering.

"Maybe just a glass of water," Paul told her. When she was gone to the kitchen, he got up and grabbed the shotgun he'd left in the corner, laying it on the floor by the couch. It was better that it be left out of sight, but within reach in case he needed it. With the tips of his fingers he nudged the curtain back and stared out the window. The overhang which covered the wraparound balcony limited his vision some.

"Mrs. Wright," he called into the kitchen. "You mind if I go upstairs and have a look out one of the bedroom windows?"

She returned just then with a tall glass of water. "I guess that would be fine."

Paul smiled. "Don't worry, I won't disturb anything. And I'll be real quick."

He took the shotgun and shells with him as he bounded up the stairs two at a time until he reached the top riser. From there he made a left and let himself into the first bedroom he came to. The minute he did it felt as though he had taken a step backward in time. The corners of the wallpaper were fraying and covered with airplanes of all shapes and sizes. Next to him was a bunk bed, a red ladder leading up to the second level. A child's desk sat against the far wall, filled with baseball trophies and MVP awards. In an eerie way, it resembled his own room as a child, and from what Paul could see, it hadn't been touched in years.

Then a picture on the wall put a face to the decor. A young boy, no older than ten, sporting a buzz cut and a gap-toothed smile. He was a handsome boy and Paul couldn't help wondering what had become of him. Was he a lawyer or doctor now, living in Kansas City? And why did his parents have such a hard time letting go?

He hadn't had more than a second to give a cursory glance out the window before he heard Teresa behind him.

"We don't come in Samuel's room anymore," she said mournfully.

Paul felt the muscles in his face slacken. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"How could you? It's been nearly forty years. Hard to imagine that much time going by without being able to speak to him. Well, that isn't completely true, is it? I still hear him most days when I'm drifting off to sleep. His teeth were still coming in and he had this funny little lisp." She looked up, her eyes red with tears.

"I can't even begin to imagine."

"He was playing in the street with his friends. Fifteenth of July, nineteen seventy-five. I'll never forget it. I'd called him to come home for dinner three times, but you know the way boys are. They always want one more second. The screeching tires outside made me drop his dinner plate. When I ran to the door, a group was gathering around a crumpled form lying on the ground. Even as the car sped away, the reality of what had happened didn't register. No one was hurt but Samuel. Ambulance arrived a few minutes later, but there wasn't any point. Our boy was already gone." She smiled weakly. "He's home with the angels now."

Buck appeared then. The heavy thread of emotion hanging in the room made him uncomfortable. "Police are on their way," he said.

Paul nodded.

Buck's gaze shifted to Teresa, who was staring out the window, her arms folded over her chest.

"We're heading to get my wife and daughter in Atlanta," Paul told her.

"Make sure you get them home," Teresa replied, her eyes still fixed outside. "Safe and sound where no one can hurt them."

Chapter 16

Back in Atlanta, Susan was in the hallway of Autumn's new apartment, knocking on her neighbors' doors. She wasn't having much luck. Her daughter would have been beside herself if she knew Susan was going around asking for food. That adolescent obsession with image was still strong in her daughter despite the fact that the entire social edifice upon which it was built was quickly coming undone. College or not, Autumn was still a teenager and that was precisely why Susan had opted to ask for help while her daughter was asleep. The knife she'd brought along, still in the plastic sheath, was tucked under the waistband of her jeans.

Finding no luck, Susan knocked on another door. As she did, she spotted a splash of sky-blue paint on her right hand from the work they'd done on Autumn's bedroom this morning before the world went haywire. The thought of so many Americans vaporized in a searing flash was hard to even fathom.

After a moment's wait with no answer, Susan moved on. Many of these folks had likely been at work when it had happened. She didn't want to imagine what the commute home would be like.

After trying nearly a dozen apartments she finally got a glimmer of hope. Her knock didn't result in an open door, but she did see the light from the peephole eclipsed by a curious eye.

"We just moved in and don't have any food," Susan said. "I was wondering if you have anything you could spare?"

The eye continued to scan her. She could feel it moving up and down, studying her distorted form through the fish-eyed lens.

"I don't have any food," a woman said from the other side.

"We don't need a lot," Susan countered. "Even a box of crackers will do."

"I'm sorry," came the reply. "I wish I could help, really I do."

Once again, Susan moved on, working her way down the hallway, each time with the same result.

At last she heard a voice in the distance. Autumn stood in the hallway, her hair slightly askew. She must have just woken up and panicked when she found Susan gone.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"Trying to get us something to eat," Susan replied, about to try the last door at the end of the hall. "If this doesn't work, we can try another floor."

Autumn stalked down the hallway after her, wearing sweat pants and a matching Panthers hoodie. Apparently the embarrassment her mother risked causing her was greater than looking like she'd just come out of the washing machine's spin cycle.

"All we need is enough to tide us over till your father gets here."

"How long will that be?" Autumn replied. "And if that runs out, are we gonna keep pestering people for charity till we've humiliated ourselves in front of every neighbor I have?"

"Do you have a better idea?" Susan asked.

“Yes. Let’s go get food like normal human beings. Those crowds outside seem to have gone away. There’s a grocery down the street and a convenience store not much further.”

“Crowd or not, I don’t think it’s safe out there,” Susan said. She could almost hear Buck’s deep voice whispering into her ear. How many times had she heard him talk about what would happen when the rule of law broke down?

Many law-abiding citizens, he’d said, would hunker down, trying to outlast the calamity until it was too late. Within a matter of days, once they’d run out of food, they’d become desperate. Those with dependants would prove the most dangerous. Parents trying to feed their hungry children would commit unspeakable acts in the process of protecting their loved ones.

Autumn was standing there. “If we’re going to go we need to do it sooner than later. Before the grocery shelves have been picked clean.”

Susan nodded half-heartedly. She didn’t want to become one of those desperate parents, but she could see herself in a few short days, hungry and afraid, convinced that breaking into someone else’s empty apartment wasn’t a crime. It was a slippery slope, and she was determined to not slide down no matter what.

Chapter 17

The streets around Edgewood and Piedmont Avenue in Atlanta were relatively deserted. Every once in a while Susan and Autumn would spot a huddled figure hurrying along. More often than not they were carrying knapsacks, presumably filled with supplies. An entire section of the city was filled with people who didn't drive, mostly students attending Georgia State. This was precisely the time that Susan regretted taking a cab from the airport. Even though she had planned to be in Atlanta for the weekend, she'd figured most of that time would be spent inside Autumn's apartment painting and getting the place ready for her freshman year.

They were nearing the grocery store when sirens approached. Thirty seconds later six cop cars roared past them at top speed, disappearing down Edgewood Avenue toward an unknown destination. Not long after the Humvee from the National Guard unit passed them. Susan expected to be stopped and told that they should return home, but it seemed the authorities had bigger fish to fry.

The demonstration which had taken place earlier on these very streets—much of it still evident in the form of shredded newspapers and other trash—would be a major concern for the authorities. One or two people wasn't the end of the world. A mob was a different matter altogether. Which was why Susan guessed the cops and National Guard were likely looking for gatherings of ten or more people. That meant for now, Susan and Autumn would have a window in which to get the things they needed in order to wait for Paul to find them.

According to Autumn, the Kroger grocery store was just around the next corner and Susan's heart was filled with both anxiety and anticipation with the thought of what they might find. But no sooner had they turned the corner that her heart became filled with something else entirely—dread. Inside the parking lot, pulled up next to the front sliding doors, were three police cars and two ambulances. Figures rushed in and out of the store, some of them with bags of food, many more with whatever they could carry. They looked like looters, but from here it was hard to tell.

"I knew this wasn't a good idea," Susan said.

Even Autumn looked frightened.

"Our best bet is to keep going straight and hit the convenience store instead," Susan said. "The large chain grocery stores are the first places people are going to hit at a time like this. If we're lucky, the smaller ones may still be intact."

If the convenience store looked anything like the Kroger's they had just passed, then the two of them would return at once to Autumn's apartment and think of a plan C. The idea that the government was preparing to swoop in and distribute aid was a nice thought, but one that wasn't entirely realistic. For at least the next seventy-two hours they would have their hands full simply trying to maintain order. No doubt, the National Guard's own command structure had been thrown into confusion when those

tankers had detonated. From here on in, everyone would be limping along, trying to do their best under the circumstances.

Not long after, the Edgewood variety store came into sight, a small red-brick building next to an empty lot. The outer wall had been painted with colourful graffiti. Not the kind of stuff that vandals and gangs tended to put up—this was beautiful artwork. But it wasn't the painting on the wall which lifted Susan's spirits. It was the lack of cop cars in front of the store and the absence of looters.

Susan reached for the door, half expecting to find it locked, relieved to see that it wasn't. A tiny bell rang overhead as she and Autumn entered. The place wasn't large: a few aisles of snack food, common household items and drinks which could either get you plastered or fat depending on your tastes.

"You better make it quick, missy," the man behind the counter said. He was balding, in his late forties and heading to the door to lock up.

Susan didn't like that, not one bit.

"Why are you locking the door?" Autumn asked.

"Because I'm getting ready to close her down before the looters show up," he replied. "It isn't safe out there. I heard what's going on over at Kroger's. Gonna take as much of this stuff as I can load into my truck 'cause I'm not expecting there to be much left to come back to. Which is why I need all of you to get what you're looking for and leave as soon as possible."

What did he mean by 'all of you?' Susan wondered, scanning the store. There was another customer in the store, a handsome young man around Autumn's age, his arms filled with packages of hot dogs and buns. Not very nutritious, but in a place like this health wasn't really an option. He smiled and nodded at them. A flush ran up Autumn's cheeks. This was hardly an appropriate time to start thinking about boys.

"Give me all the cash you have on you," Susan said.

Autumn complied. Between the two of them they had fifty bucks, which Susan figured was more than enough to get them through the next few days. They grabbed some whole wheat bread, prepackaged cold cuts, mustard, beef jerky, Oreo cookies and as many bottles of water they could carry and headed for the register. The power wasn't working and so scanning the items or using the till wasn't possible. The owner's eyes cut from one item to another as he made a mental calculation.

"That'll be sixty-five bucks."

"Excuse me?" Susan said.

"You heard me, lady. That'll be sixty-five. Listen, I was nice enough to let you in."

"And we appreciate that," Autumn replied. "But there's no way this stuff costs that much money."

The epiphany hit Susan all at once. "He's hiking the prices."

Autumn turned to him. "You know that's illegal."

"All I know is I'm closing, so do you want the stuff or not?"

"We only have fifty," Susan said, leafing through the bills in her hand to check again. "Will you take a check?"

The man laughed. "To be cashed by what bank?"

"We'll need to put some stuff back," Autumn said, frowning.

Susan certainly wasn't dying to eat cold cuts for the next few days, but the thought that they might not have enough food anymore was what frightened her the most. Maybe they could try another store, but who said it wouldn't be the same everywhere?

"So what's it gonna be?" the owner said, drumming his fingers on the counter in a beat that sounded like a military drumbeat. "I gotta get home to my family too, you know."

"I'll cover whatever they're missing," a male voice said from behind them.

Susan turned to see the young man from before, leaning over the counter as he deposited his hot dogs and buns.

"Fine. All together it comes to ninety."

Susan handed the owner her fifty and the man next to her gave him the rest. "Are you sure about this?" Susan asked him, feeling both euphoric and guilt-ridden at the same time.

He smiled, dimples forming on his cheeks. "I'm positive. I'm sure if the tables were turned you woulda done the same for me."

Autumn was noticeably silent. Good-looking boys had a habit of turning girls into mutes.

"Thank you," Susan told him as they made their way to the door. "The Lord repays kindness and punishes people who take advantage of those in need." That last bit she tacked on for the store owner's benefit. Hopefully, if another opportunity to help someone presented itself, he wouldn't fail that test nearly as badly.

Once outside, Susan thanked the young man again.

"I'm Chet Harding," he offered without being asked.

Susan and Autumn introduced themselves.

"We really should be going," Susan told him. "But we won't forget what you did."

Chet nodded.

The two women began walking away and noticed Chet was heading in the same direction.

"He looks to me like a Georgia State student," Autumn said. "Probably heading back to the dorms."

"Let's hope so. Now we just need to put some distance between us."

"Oh, Mom, you're such a paranoid android. You can't just take someone's help and then run away from them like they're some kind of demon. Seems so heartless, especially after he helped us like that."

"Yes, but we don't know him."

That was when Susan noticed the two men on the opposite side of the street, turning to look in their direction every few seconds. There was something about the way they walked. It had an almost predatory quality that made her uneasy.

"See those two men across the street?" she asked her daughter.

"Who, them?"

"Yeah, don't stare."

"What about them?"

"I'm not sure. They keep looking over here."

Just then a cop car sped by and one of the men stopped, pretending to look in a shop window.

"I don't like this one bit," Susan said. What had begun as an uneasy feeling was quickly morphing into an all-out panic.

Chet was less than ten feet behind them now. A few seconds later he drew even with the two women.

Susan smiled. "Hey, Chet."

He returned the gesture.

"Would you mind walking us home?" Susan asked him, since Autumn was still tongue-tied in Chet's presence. "We're just on the corner of Edgewood and Piedmont."

"Sure thing."

By the time they arrived outside their building, the two men following them had crossed the street and were gaining quickly. So far Chet had been a perfect gentleman, a shining knight who within the span of thirty minutes had saved them twice. Susan also knew that if somebody wanted to get inside an apartment building badly enough, they would find a way. The prospect of being trapped up there with these two men looking for a way in was beyond disconcerting.

"If you like, I'd be happy to see you right to your door," Chet offered. "Make sure you got in safe and sound."

"Would you?" Susan asked.

The two men were less than ten meters away when Susan reached into her pocket and fumbled for the keys. If they broke into a run now, she wasn't sure she could keep her cool. Forcing her fingers to close around the lobby key in her pocket, she whipped it out and jammed it into the lock. A second later they were inside, Susan rushing them in as she closed the door behind them.

The two men stopped and glared at them like a pair of lions eyeing a group of wounded gazelles who had narrowly escaped.

Chapter 18

Paul and Buck remained in the upstairs hallway while Teresa made her way downstairs.

"You didn't tell the police we were here, did you?" Paul asked in a whisper.

"Why would I?"

"Because we killed a man back there, Buck."

Buck pressed a finger into Paul's chest. "No, *you* killed a man. I only stabbed mine in the eye. Besides, I made sure that Travis only told the cops they'd heard shots over by the Phillips 66. I'm sure those boys already got their hands full, which explains why those convicts haven't been picked up yet."

"We need to find a way of getting our hands on a car and fast."

"I took care of that too," Buck said with a sly grin. "The old guy downstairs says he's got a neighbour with a virtual dealership of used cars on his front lawn. Might not be perfect, but at least they should get us going in the right direction."

Paul nodded, not entirely able to ignore the ball of stress churning in his guts.

"What were you and the old lady talking about in that creepy bedroom?" Buck asked.

"Go easy, Buck. These are good people who lost their son years ago and never got over it."

"That right? Half the country's mourning the loss of loved ones."

The sound of police sirens drew their attention. Both men hurried downstairs.

Over by the kitchen, Travis was filling an old backpack with cans of food and bottles of water. Teresa added half a loaf of bread she'd baked that morning.

When they were done, Travis pointed to the kitchen table where he had stacked a box of Remington shotgun shells.

"I got a Colt .45 I brought back from Korea," Travis said, "but that one stays with me."

If being shown so much compassion by complete strangers had taken Paul by surprise, it had left Buck completely bewildered. Beside him, his father-in-law stood frozen, all two hundred and fifty pounds of him, his eyes ping-ponging between a sack full of food and the much-needed supplies they were being given.

"We can't pay you for all this," Buck said. "Not after those men stole our wallets."

"Don't worry about paying," Teresa told him. "There's a dark cloud come over our country and the two of you still have a long way to go. I'm sure between here and there you'll find someone else in need. All I ask is that you pay it forward."

"We will," Paul replied, feeling a knot forming in his throat.

All Buck could do was raise his hand, presumably in a sign of thanks since the power of speech had presently eluded him.

Travis came forward with the backpack, handed it to Buck and moved to shake his hand. Instead, Buck pulled him into a hug, nearly pulling him off his feet.

"Down, boy," Paul said. "We wanna thank them, not put them in the hospital."

Buck let go, patting Travis on the shoulder as he stepped back, winded, but still smiling.

"Stop in on your way back, won't you?" Teresa said. "Let us know everything turned out all right."

"We sure will," Paul replied, hugging her gently.

When all the goodbyes were said and done, Paul and Buck gathered the shotgun and the rest of their belongings and made for the front door. They stopped briefly on the porch to peer off in the direction of the gas station. The flashing lights from a number of cop cars danced off the surrounding houses.

Paul looked up into a beautiful late-afternoon sky, hardly a cloud in sight. It was hard to imagine so much horror being visited on the world during such a gorgeous day.

"Don't forget," Travis called after them. "Bill Parrett's house is three streets over in that direction." He motioned down 3rd Street. "Can't miss it, green house with six cars on the front lawn. Hopefully you'll be able to work out some kind of agreement. Just don't forget to mention my name."

The two men staggered off at a rapid pace. It wouldn't be long before detectives came knocking on Travis' door asking questions and Paul wanted to be as far away as possible before that happened. He trusted the nice old man, but there was no telling what Travis might reveal under closer scrutiny.

On the other hand, Buck didn't mind lying to the cops one iota. The idea left Paul feeling less than comfortable, although he was even less at ease with the alternative. Even murdering a man in self-defense required a trial that could take months and, given the state of things, maybe even years.

"Stop looking over your shoulder," Buck growled. "You're making us look like a pair of criminals."

"I can't help feeling like one."

"This is what I was talking about before, Paul. You're gonna have to toughen up. It was either us or them back there. You didn't do nothing wrong."

Paul kept nodding as though the act somehow made Buck's words go down easier. "Anything wrong," Paul said at last.

"What?"

"You said 'I didn't do nothing wrong'. That's bad grammar."

"Oh, thank you, Professor. I can't wait to see what that big brain of yours comes up with when the food and water in this here bag runs out."

"We'll just need to find more," Paul replied, wondering if Buck was asking a trick question.

"At the supermarket, I'll bet." Buck let out a bellowing laugh. "If I dumped you in the woods with nothing but this pocket knife"—Buck yanked it out of his pocket, blood still on the grip—"you'd be dead in two days or less."

"I could last longer than that."

"Really, how? By drinking your own pee?"

"Maybe," Paul replied, although he knew his false bravado was only making him look silly.

"If thirst didn't do you in first, then the animals would. Being a prepper ain't just about being able to survive for a few extra days if the grid goes down. It's a way of life."

It's about freedom and getting back to the things that once made this country great."

"Made us? You make it sound like our greatness is long gone."

"And for good reason," Buck replied as they passed the second street. "And I'm not just talking about those cities that got nuked. This sort of thing's been a long time coming. Over the years there's been lots of voices trying to warn people that if something real bad happens, we don't have a backup plan. How many people know how their cars work? You ask 'em and they'll say, 'Sure, I hit the gas pedal and she goes.' But that's not what I mean. Very few know precisely what makes their cars work and the mechanics of the world—like the grease monkeys who worked at the Phillips 66 station—aren't complaining one bit. Heck, other people's ignorance puts food on their table, and maybe even buys their kids an education."

"Yeah, and what's wrong with that?"

Buck shook his head. "Information is power, that's what's wrong with it. When you've got a country filled with people who rely on the expertise of others, you have a time bomb waiting to go off. We're seeing the proof of that right now. The bombs that took out all those cities are bad enough, so is the radiation which is already on its way. But it's only when the power grid gets knocked out that you start to really see what I mean. You ask a child where chicken comes from and you know what he'll say?"

"The supermarket."

Buck laughed. "And he may even remember they stock it along the back aisle in the cold section. You think he understands it starts out as a bird? That it needs to be defeathered, gutted, the meat taken off the bone?"

"No, of course not, but that's a child."

"Once all those grocery shelves empty out and folks start feeling those hunger pangs the desperation begins to take over. That's one of the reasons I insisted on coming along to clean up your mess. I wanted to get my daughter and granddaughter back to safety before things went completely to Hell."

"What do you mean cleaning up my mess?"

"I told you before," Buck said, pulling the brim of his cap down an inch. "You dropped the ball the minute you let them go off on their own."

"I can't follow them around. I thought we already went over this."

"No, of course you can't, but what's the real reason you didn't stay there to help, Paul?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what's the real reason you went back to Nebraska? You said earlier you wanted the girls to have some time alone."

"Yes."

"So there wasn't anything else informing your decision?"

"I had to work."

"Oh, come on. You run a music shop. You telling me you woulda gone bankrupt if you'd stayed in Atlanta two more days?"

Paul's heart was thumping in his chest. Of course, there were other reasons he'd come home while Susan flew out to Atlanta. He'd wanted some time to himself. The house would be quiet and he could eat on the couch or in bed without getting an earful. It also meant he could stay up late, play his guitar at full tilt until his fingers bled if he really wanted to. He needed some solo time and there was nothing wrong with that. But then how could a judgmental guy like Buck understand such things? After

driving off his own wife and nearly everyone else, solo time was all Buck had left. Paul wasn't a bad person, was he?

Up ahead he spotted the house Travis had told them about. He hadn't been kidding about the cars parked on the front lawn, except there weren't six of them. From here it looked more like ten.

Buck seemed to notice that as well. "Place looks like Sam Raferty's junkyard," he whispered. An observation which under different circumstances might have amused Paul since Buck's property back in Nebraska was quickly heading in that direction too—a landscaping design Paul liked to call 'post-tornado.'

As they approached, a man glared at them from his porch. The moment they drew even with his house, the man racked his shotgun and told them that was far enough. "You two boys stay right where you are. Sheriff'll be here any second."

Chapter 19

"You called the sheriff?" Paul asked, wondering when the phone lines were fixed.

"He didn't do nothing of the sort," Buck whispered. "He's bluffing." He turned to the old man and threw his hands into the air. "We ain't here to hurt you, old-timer. Your neighbor Travis Wright sent us. Our truck broke down not far from here and he said you might be able to lend a hand."

The man on the porch used the butt of the shotgun to prop himself up. "Who you calling old-timer? If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you were one of them stunt doubles for Kenny Rogers."

Paul let out a snicker. Buck didn't make a sound and he didn't need to. If smoke could shoot from a man's ears in real life, that was what Paul would be seeing right now.

"Sides," the old guy said, "Travis Wright and his wife Teresa are a pair of no-good liberals come down here from Vermont. Well, they can head on back to their cows for all I care. I heard those shots earlier and the police sirens not long after. The sheriff or at least one of his deputies should be rolling through here any minute now."

"Then you didn't call him?"

"With what? Don't you know the phones and 'lectricity's gone out?" He stood there as though regarding a couple of village idiots. A loose shirt and slacks hung from his body like a bed sheet from a clothesline.

"Listen," Paul said, "we've got a long way to go. My wife and daughter are stranded hundreds of miles from here and we're trying to bring them home to Greenwood."

The man's face twitched at that last part. Had the story about Paul's family melted the old guy's heart?

"Greenwood, Nebraska?" he said, working his jaw to keep the dentures in his mouth.

Paul was surprised. "Yeah, you know it?"

"I got a relative up that way. Cousin of mine named Jarvis Taylor."

The expression on Buck's face soured right away. "Forget this guy," he said in what was less of a whisper than Paul would have liked.

"You're related to Jarvis?" Paul said with surprise.

"Course I am. You know him?" The old man looked suspicious.

"Sure do. He's got a cattle farm right near us."

"That's true, he does raise cattle. Well, I'll be." The old man set the shotgun down and waved them over. "Any friend of Jarvis' is a friend of mine."

Buck leaned over. "Great. And what are we gonna do when he finds out Jarvis and I hate each other's guts?"

"We just gotta make sure he doesn't," Paul replied with a sheepish grin.

Chapter 20

Soon they were in the man's house, Paul painfully aware of every second that ticked by.

"Name's Bill Parrett. Folks round here call me Wild Bill."

"I can see why," Paul said, shaking hands. "I'm Paul."

Buck stuck out his hand. "And I'm Bu—"

"—Marv," Paul cut in, just in case Bill knew of Buck and Jarvis' longstanding feud.

"Barv?" Bill said, his thin lips forming a puzzled frown. "I ain't never heard a name like that before."

"It's Belgian," Paul added, trying to smooth things over and getting a piercing look from Buck in the process.

"Well, I suppose there's a first for everything. You boys want something to drink?"

Bill's house could more accurately be described as a shack. A cat ran between Buck's legs and meowed, nearly giving the big man a heart attack.

"Oh, don't mind her," Bill said. "That's Cindy. She's just getting used to you. Won't be another minute before she tries scaling up Barv's clothes to sit on his shoulder."

Buck smiled weakly. "Can't hardly wait."

But Cindy wasn't the only feline around. Seemed Wild Bill wasn't wanting for companions. In the short time they'd been here, Paul had already counted over half a dozen furry little critters. Although their presence had been given away the moment Bill pushed open his front door, since the overpowering odor of a collection of dirty litter boxes had hit both men like a slap in the face.

"So about the car that Travis mentioned," Paul said, trying to broach the subject without Bill feeling like his hospitality was unwelcomed.

"Where I come from," Bill replied, "it just ain't right to talk business unless both parties have shared a drink. What's your poison, gentlemen?"

Paul and Buck looked at each other.

"I could go for some whiskey," Paul said. "Got anything aged ten or fifteen years?"

Bill stepped around the corner into the kitchen and swung the fridge open. "Afraid I'm all outa whiskey right now, but I do got something a little more recent." He returned holding two beer cans. "Coors or Busch Light?"

Paul made it a point of never drinking domestic beers, especially the canned stuff they sold in grocery stores by the case.

"I'll take the Coors," Buck said, his eyes brightening.

"Guess that leaves the Busch Light for you, Paul," Bill said, tossing him the can.

If the thought of pouring cheap cold beer down his throat seemed unappealing, the thought of doing the same with a warm beer made his stomach turn.

Bill scurried off to get his own and the three men pulled the tabs back and cheered one another, the forced grin on Paul's face plastered there with all his might.

"Bottoms up," Buck said and tilted it back, his throat working as he downed the entire thing down in one go. When he finished, he let out a burp and crushed the can into a tiny ball.

Bill did the same. When he was done, both men turned to Paul, who took a sip and raised the can as if to let them know how great all of this was.

"Chug it," Buck ordered him.

"What?"

"Beer wasn't made for sippin'," Bill spat, slapping his bony knee with the palm of his hand and flashing them a pair of gnarly dentures.

Paul's eyes jumped between each man, knowing full well that their success in convincing the old man to give them a car might depend on this very moment.

"Go on, you sissy," Buck said, nudging him.

Paul wiped the mouth of the can with his shirt and only afterward brought it to his lips. Like everyone else he'd heard the stories about rats peeing on cans stored in warehouses and wasn't about to risk contracting some disease. Leaning back, he felt the warm, carbonated liquid pass over his tongue and roll down his throat. The urge to stop was strong. The urge to throw it up all over them was stronger, but he fought both and stopped when the last of the beer was gone.

Buck slapped him on the back. "That a boy. I thought all you college boys could drink?"

Paul's eyes were still watering. "That was more than twenty years ago."

"I still can't believe you two know Jarvis," Bill said. "What a miniscule world we live in. Last time we spoke musta been months ago. He was having trouble with that neighbor of his. Buck, I think his name was. Or maybe Bobby. Cross between a mule and a bull. That's how Jarvis used to describe him. A really petty SOB too, squabbling over a few feet of property. Even used his tractor to knock down...."

"Yeah, we know the story," Buck cut him off.

Bill looked at him strangely. "Well, I didn't mean no offense. I take it you know this Buck character too?"

"You might say that," Paul replied, trying to keep from breathing in the cat litter fumes.

Buck straightened his cap and fidgeted with a child's squirt gun he found on a small table next to him. "Buck's not such a bad guy."

"Really," Paul said. "Maybe you don't think so, but half of Greenwood does. That I can promise you. He's one of those angry men who'll bite your face off for having the gall to disagree." He turned to Buck. "You know what I mean?"

"I hear what you're saying," Buck shot back. "But from what I hear Buck ain't all that bad. There's two sides to every story. The way I heard it, that Jarvis was building on land that wasn't his. All Buck done was enact his rights."

Bill didn't like the sound of that and Paul gave Buck a reproachful look. This wasn't the moment to prove that he was right and Jarvis was wrong.

Buck drew in a breath and let the air out real slow. "I will admit that sometimes Buck can be curt and unfriendly."

"That's putting it mildly," Paul said, trying to have fun. "The man is like a bull in a China shop."

Buck looked at him. "Maybe he's something like that."

"A real unreasonable piece of dung," Bill added, smiling.

Buck gripped the squirt gun and worked the lever with his finger, producing nothing but dry wisps of air. "All right, Buck's the biggest jerk in Nebraska." He turned to Paul.

"You happy?"

"Very," Paul said, his face split by a widening grin.

“Good, then I’d like another warm beer, Bill. And this time make it a Busch Light.”

Chapter 21

The three men had moved outside to the part of Bill's property where he kept his cars. The majority of them looked as though they'd sat for some time. The rest looked in dire need of a mechanic or a one-way trip to the scrap yard.

"You sure these will run?" Buck asked the old guy. "There's quite a distance between here and Atlanta."

"Only one I know for sure is the Chevrolet Celebrity," Bill offered. "She's an eighty-eight model."

"American-made," Buck said with growing confidence.

"That's right, Barv. I don't mess with any of those foreign contraptions. American-built is good enough for me."

Paul studied the car. Burgundy with a matching interior. He wasn't going to be picky so long as it would get them from point A to B.

"Any gas in the tank?" Buck asked, running his hand along the hood.

"I filled her up couple days ago. Had a man here yesterday from Kansas City interested in buying her. I figure once the power comes back on he'll be calling. But if you boys really want it, I may be able to lean him toward the Pontiac Grand Am."

"I wouldn't hold your breath about that buyer, Bill," Buck told him. "There ain't no telling when the power's gonna come back on."

Bill fixed him in a puzzled stare.

"I don't think he knows," Paul said.

"Knows what?" Bill asked, becoming agitated.

"We've been attacked, Bill," Paul said as plainly as he could.

"Attacked?"

"The USA, Bill," Buck cut in. "Terrorists went and detonated nuclear bombs in our biggest port cities. Smuggled 'em in using container ships. It's about as bad as it gets. That's why we're heading to Atlanta, to grab our loved ones and bring 'em home."

Bill's jaw was twitching wildly as his eyes darted from one man to the other, not entirely sure if they were pulling his leg or not.

Paul put a hand on the old man's shoulder. "See, Bu... I mean Barv here's got a bunker under his barn that we're gonna head to before the radiation reaches us."

Buck dug an elbow into his ribs and Paul let out a squeal.

"You two ain't pulling my leg, are you?"

"No, sir," Paul said. "It's hard to wrap your head around, I know, especially for us folks smack dab in the middle of the country. I can't even imagine what's going on up and down the East and West Coasts."

"Not to mention the Gulf of Mexico," Buck added.

Paul couldn't help feeling bad for the old man, but even stronger was his yearning to get back on the road as soon as possible. "Those gunshots you heard before, Bill. I'm sure that's just the first sign that the threads of society are slowly coming undone."

As if on cue a police cruiser pulled to a stop in front of Bill's house. The passenger window rolled down and a voice from inside asked if everything was okay.

"Not really, Deputy Brant," Bill shot back, his voice tight with emotion. "I'm not sure I believe what these two gentlemen are telling me."

Brant seemed to catch on right away. He got out of the car and as he did Paul's pulse began speeding up.

"Afraid it is, Bill," the deputy said, shaking his head. "We're still waiting for more information to roll in. National Guard's on its way from Topeka. Seems like all Hell's breaking loose and we're seriously undermanned."

"Heard some automatic gunfire earlier," Bill added and Paul wished he'd just kept quiet.

"Yup, it's a bloody scene up there. We're still putting the pieces together. Looks like a robbery, but we're not sure just yet. Got a few dead as well, including two men we're trying to identify."

"Two?" Buck blurted out without thinking.

"That's right," the deputy replied. "One took a shotgun blast to the chest. The other musta split his skull open when he fell."

Buck grew quiet.

"You don't think they're some of them terrorists, do you?" Bill asked.

"Tough to say, but I wouldn't rule it out entirely. Our biggest problem is the power and communication networks. They're overloaded, which means we're hard pressed for a situation report." Deputy Brant looked over at Paul and then over to Buck. "You two aren't from around here."

Paul shook his head and hoped he didn't look nervous. "We're friends of Travis Wright. He suggested we pay a visit to old Bill here."

"Paul and Barv," Bill said, swinging a skinny arm around each man. "Two stand-up boys, that's for sure. Well, listen, Deputy, I been hearing talk about radiation and nuclear fallout—"

"The call right now is for everyone to stay inside and keep an eye out for anything unusual," Brant said. "That's why I'm making the rounds. So I'd appreciate if you gentlemen finish whatever it is you're doing and head inside." And with that Brant got back into his cruiser and slowly drove away.

Bill gripped his head with both hands. "I still can't hardly believe it," he said. It was becoming his mantra.

"You live alone, Bill?" Buck asked.

"Well, not if you count my cats I don't."

"But no other people, right?"

Bill shook his head.

"The problem we're facing right now," Buck began, folding his arms over his burly chest, "is we ain't got any spare cash on us at the moment."

"You don't?" Bill said, almost to himself.

"No, but I'll tell you what. You give us the car you got that's in the best condition and when we come back through here on our way home, I'll bring you to my bunker. It's nothing fancy, but it has filters to keep the radiation out."

Bill took a step back. "I can't ask you to do something like that, Barv."

Buck bit his lip. "You'd be doing us a great service. I can't promise we're gonna make it back in one piece, if at all, but you have my word that if we do, you're coming with us."

"What about my cats?"

Paul's eyes went wide and not just because of his allergies. He couldn't believe Buck was offering to bring a man who was practically a stranger into his top-secret bunker.

"No cats," Buck said. "Let 'em go free when the time comes. Least they'll have a fighting chance."

"I don't know what to say," Bill said, his eyes filling with tears, his thin lips quivering with emotion.

"There's only one other thing I need," Buck said.

"You name it, Barv."

Buck pulled the child's squirt gun he'd found in Bill's kitchen from his pocket. "This."

Chapter 22

Susan, Autumn, and Chet had been putting away the food they brought back from the variety store when the knock came on Autumn's apartment door. The fridge still had some cool air locked inside, which would be more than enough to keep the meat from going bad over the next couple of days.

"Are you expecting someone?" Chet asked.

Susan thought immediately of her trek down the corridor, knocking on any apartment she could find, looking for someone willing to donate a bit of food. Perhaps one of the people who had been too afraid to open up before had finally found the courage.

Walking briskly to the front door, Susan put her eye to the peephole and peered out. Out in the hallway was a sight which made the blood in her veins run cold. Turning toward the others, she whispered: "It's them."

"Who?" Chet asked.

"The men who followed us home. They must have found a way inside."

The false sense of security Susan had felt the minute they'd locked the front door to the apartment complex behind them was now shattered.

Susan went back to the peephole. One of the men, short, balding, and with a receding hairline, flashed a badge.

"Police, open up," he ordered them.

"What's this about?" Susan replied. "We've done nothing wrong."

That was her first mistake. The two men didn't ask again, but instead began kicking at Autumn's apartment door. The hinges buckled every time the heels of their feet slammed into the wood. Her daughter screamed and Chet ran over to help Susan buttress the door.

"There's never a dull moment with you two, is there?" Chet observed. If he was afraid he wasn't showing it and at least that calmed her nerves a bit.

"The knife set," Susan whispered to Autumn. "Grab two of them. One for you and Chet." The third was still tucked under Susan's waistband. She would pull it out if it looked as though the two men were about to breach the door. She glanced out the peephole again in time to see them continuing to batter away. It was clear by now the two men weren't cops. They'd only used the ruse as a way to determine if someone was home and possibly con their way inside. In her case a lifetime of being a law-abiding citizen had nearly played right into their hands. If Buck was here, he probably would have run them off with a rack of the shotgun he kept by his front entrance.

"Autumn," Susan yelled. "Go lock yourself in the bathroom."

Her daughter shook her head, holding a knife she clearly didn't know how to use. "I'm not going anywhere."

The door continued to shudder under the relentless assault and Susan knew for sure in a matter of minutes their attackers would be inside. Once that happened, there was no telling what they would do.

Chapter 23

The growing chaos that Finch and his men found in Kansas City had proved to be the cover they were looking for. With two of their own dead, Finch himself wounded and the cops on their tail, the gang had little choice but to lie low. The abandoned house on 41st Street in the seedier part of town was turning out to be a great choice. Altogether they had commandeered three vehicles—the Hummer they'd ripped off from the men at the Phillips station as well as two sedans they'd jacked along the way.

Although the group had temporarily split up after the gas station debacle, they'd kept in touch via walkie-talkies they'd taken from guards at the prison during their escape.

The instructions to Finch's men had been clear. Find the two who'd done this and bring them back. A bullet to the head was far too generous a death. These guys would be made to suffer.

The second part of their mission had been to gather some supplies.

With still no word back, Finch was beginning to worry.

He leaned back in the dusty kitchen chair as PJ tended to his wounded eye. The pain was near excruciating, but Finch was careful not to show weakness. Not around this pack of wild dogs. Sometimes your reputation was all that stood between you and a shiv between the ribs.

"How much longer's it gonna be?" Finch barked, pulling out his silver .38 caliber S&W and placing it on the table.

"Hold still," PJ said. PJ wasn't the kid's real name, of course. It was something like Salvador or Al. Finch didn't know and didn't care. What he did know was that PJ had once been an Air Force Pararescue serving in Afghanistan—essentially a helicopter medic who was flown into war zones to retrieve the wounded. Seemed like a far cry from doing time in Leavenworth, but everyone had a sob story and Finch had heard them all.

In PJ's version, patients under his care kept not making it home. The Air Force had investigated and found the levels of morphine he was administering were far too high. PJ claimed the other medic he worked with must have done it, but when that same medic testified against him during the court martial, the avalanche had proven too strong. He was buried up to his neck by military bureaucracy and shoulda been locked away for the next fifty years.

He still proclaimed his innocence. That part was no shocker, but PJ's desire to join Finch's group during their daring escape certainly had been a surprise. PJ had been a model inmate who only wanted to get back to his wife and child. The pair lived in Gainesville, Florida and that would be his final destination.

Finch winced as PJ worked to stitch up what was left of his eye. The real shame would be losing someone with his skillset.

The front door burst in just then, followed by boisterous voices Finch knew all too well.

"Daryl, Jax, that you?" Finch called out.

"Yeah, Sarge," Jax responded.

Loaded in Jax's impossibly skinny arms were several six-packs of beer, junk food, cigarettes and a deck of playing cards. Like PJ, Jax had been given his nickname after a story in which he purportedly killed a man with a jackhammer.

"Glad to see you're still eating healthy," Finch observed.

Jax grinned, flashing his signature toothless smile. He and Daryl were still wearing the mechanics' coveralls they'd taken from the workers at the Phillips 66.

"Eye's looking better," Jax lied.

The men had been tiptoeing around the subject ever since Finch had been stabbed by the big guy with the white beard. They knew perfectly well their leader's penchant for taking revenge on those who wronged him. His background in the Air Force training academy at Lackland was more than ample testament to this fact.

In Finch's estimation, the military's major mistake had been hiring female cadets. The next fault belonged to those same female cadets when they chose to rebuff his sexual advances. It didn't matter so much that they eventually spoke up and got him arrested and charged, because he'd already taught those tramps who was really in charge.

This wasn't a new story for Finch of course. His psych evaluation had stated that the man had two distinct sides to him. One side was charming, kind, and gregarious. The other was a misogynistic rapist, a dark side that was always there, lurking just beneath the surface, waiting to spring. Even during college, the girls who'd ridiculed his advances had all discovered his dark side firsthand. Likewise in prison, where he'd employed other weapons, the same warning had always been on the lips of those around him. "Don't mess with Finch."

"Did you get what I asked you?" Finch asked, his patience wearing as thin as the thread drawing his eyelid shut.

Jax and Daryl both nodded at once. "Sweets and Huckleberry got the rubbing alcohol and painkillers you asked for." Daryl pulled a stack of bills from his pocket. "We also grabbed some spending money from the pharmacy in case certain needs arose."

"Did you kill anyone?" Finch asked.

Jax hesitated. "Not exactly kill. The fat old pharmacist—well, she was actually the pharmacist's assistant. But anyway, she wasn't what I'd call cooperative, so we had a conversation of sorts." Jax and Daryl both doubled over in laughter. "I ain't never took you for a softy, Sarge."

Finch's one eye narrowed. "I don't want you two idiots bringing more heat down on us than we already have. You wanna go back to Leavenworth?" He turned to Daryl. "Do you?"

Both men shook their heads.

PJ couldn't agree more. "If I get locked away from my family again, I don't know what I'd do."

Finch tapped his hand. "Don't worry, son, we'll get you there. You just keep focusing on making me pretty again."

That made Jax and Daryl burst into more fits of giggling. The two men were each opening a beer when Sweets and Huckleberry sauntered in with more junk food, this time peanut M&M's and candy bars.

Sweets handed Finch the items he'd asked for. "If I'd had to eat one more bag of trail mix, I'd have lost my mind," Sweets said. He was a black former private who

topped three hundred pounds and sported a sweet tooth that would send most grown men to the emergency room for an insulin shot. The trail mix he was referring to had come from the supplies they'd found in the back of the Hummer. Apart from the weapons, they'd found lots of other gear—chemical suits, breathers, a Geiger counter and lots of dried nuts.

Next to Sweets was Huckleberry. Since he stood a little over five feet and was decked out with the reddest hair and freckles this side of the Mississippi, inmates had taken to naming him after the character in Twain's classic. He'd become something of a kleptomaniac and pickpocket over the years. As far as Finch was concerned, the kid's only real mistake was plying his trade on a general's pocketbook and then running the man's credit card up on prostis and liquor. That had gotten him a solid six years, two of which he'd already served.

"So I'm guessing you couldn't find..." Finch paused and glanced down at the two driver's licences he'd plucked from the men's wallets. "William 'Buck' Baker and Paul Edwards."

Sweets had his hand buried wrist-deep in a forty-two-ounce bag of peanut M&Ms. "No sign of them, Sarge. We spent a real long time looking all over the place. Least until the cops showed up and we decided to book it."

Jax nodded. "Same here. But unless they know how to hotwire a car, with no wallets, I don't see 'em getting very far."

"You might be surprised," Finch told them. "Never underestimate your opponent's resourcefulness."

PJ finished sewing Finch's eye and leaned back to examine his handiwork. "We do have their home address," he said. "Maybe we can pay them a visit."

Finch looked down at the IDs again. "That's not a horrible idea. Looks like our good ol' boys are from Greenwood, Nebraska."

The expression on PJ's face morphed to concern. "But I'm heading down to Gainesville. That's in the opposite direction."

Finch grew quiet, hating the idea of PJ leaving the group.

Just then, the muscles in Jax's face went limp. He thrust a hand into his pocket and produced a crumpled piece of paper, holding it in the air. "Maybe we don't need to split up our fine little family after all," Jax said. "Least not yet."

"What are you saying?" Finch asked, not liking the little game he was playing.

"Sure, we know where these boys live, but that's no guarantee they're gonna be there anytime soon. Fact, I can practically guarantee it. Totally skipped my mind till now, but the one with the big head and the wavy hair had this piece of paper on him." Jax read it aloud. "Autumn's address: 160 Edgewood, apartment 603. Corner of Edgewood and Piedmont Avenue."

"That's in Atlanta," PJ said.

Daryl added, "They were headed in the right direction and that Hummer of theirs was packed to the gills."

Finch was nodding, scanning between them with his one good eye. "So then we know where they're headed."

The men around him were smiling now.

"And you know what that means, don't you?" Finch asked. None of them answered, because they understood the Sarge liked to be the one to say it out loud. "It means we need to get there first."

Chapter 24

Chet was doing his best to brace the door against the flurry of kicks coming from the two men outside. The hinges were showing signs of giving way and with each boom came the distinct sound of wood cracking. Susan stood nearby, the knife gripped tightly in her hand. When they finally broke through, she would be right there with the blade, swinging with everything she had.

Even Chet, who'd been calm and collected since they'd recently met, was beginning to show signs of fear. His heart was probably pounding because he was pulling in huge lungfuls of air.

"I can't hold them much longer," he said, worried.

Then all at once, the pounding stopped. Out in the hallway, Susan caught voices, shouting for the men to get down on the ground. Chet set his eye to the peephole and reported what he was seeing.

"They're down on the ground."

"Really?" Autumn said, jubilant.

"It could be another trap," Susan said, sounding more like her father every day. "They were already pretending to be policemen. Who's to say they aren't trying some elaborate ruse to make us open up?"

Chet seemed to agree. Beads of sweat were rolling down his forehead. Susan was sure that if it were up to him, he'd never open that door again.

"What's happening now?" Autumn asked him.

"Uh, there's a handful of men around, putting them in handcuffs. Some are cops and others are dressed in military clothes."

"Fatigues?" Susan asked.

"Yeah, and they have rifles."

Chet craned his head for a better look. "Seems the woman across the hall has opened her door and is ogling."

Just then a knock came.

"What do we do?" Chet asked.

"We open," Susan responded without hesitation.

"But what if they're bad?" Autumn said fearfully.

"If they were, they'd have already used those assault rifles to blast their way in here. Move." Susan had to nudge Chet out of the way.

The door swung open, revealing a handsome soldier with spiky, dirty blond hair and strong features. He appeared to be in his early twenties and a barely audible gasp escaped Autumn's lips when she saw him.

"You folks okay in here?"

"We're fine," Chet said quickly.

The soldier looked from Chet back to Susan. The name stitched onto his chest read Stephens.

Behind him, the two men were being read their rights. Then they were lifted onto their feet and marched away by a combination of policemen and soldiers.

Over the handsome soldier's shoulder, Susan could see the late middle-aged neighbor getting an eyeful.

"Name's Brett," the soldier said, holding out his hand. Susan shook it. Autumn was next to her. Chet stood a few feet behind them, not saying a word.

"We were making a sweep of this sector when we saw the lobby door to this apartment complex had been kicked in. I'd hate to think what might have happened if we'd missed that."

Susan flashed her knife as well as a grin. "We girls aren't as helpless as you might think. My father's a vet."

A voice from down the hallway called after Brett.

"Those men said they were cops," Susan told him. "But we didn't believe them."

"It may shock you to hear this, but those men were police officers."

Susan felt the muscles in her face go limp. "I don't understand."

"Sometimes a state of emergency can bring out the worst in some people."

"What do you think they wanted?" Autumn asked. "Money?"

"Two beautiful women all alone," Brett said. He and Chet then made eye contact. "Well, not quite alone," he amended. "But you know what I mean."

A quick glance at Autumn told Susan her daughter hadn't heard a single word he said after beautiful.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," Brett said, reaching into his pocket and coming out with a row of pills, packaged in blisters. He tore off three of them and handed them to Susan. He then did the same for the neighbor standing in her doorway behind them.

"What's this for?" Autumn asked.

"Protection against radiation," Brett replied. "As you may already know, we've been tracking the prevailing winds coming in from the coast where the detonations occurred and they're heading this way."

"Will you come back to check up on us?" Autumn asked him.

Brett began to back away, grinning. "I'll see what I can do. You folks take care."

Autumn, Susan and the middle-aged neighbor watched him disappear.

After that they closed the door and locked it.

"I think I should probably go," Chet said, his cheeks a distinct shade of red.

Fear flashed across Autumn's face. "Really? Can't you stay a little longer?"

He sighed and stared down at the coffee table. Slowly a grin began to appear on Chet's lips. "Maybe I can stay for a bit," he said. "Make sure you girls are safe and sound."

Having a man around should have made Susan happy—it certainly made Autumn happy—but she couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Chapter 25

The gridlock Paul and Buck encountered as they left Kansas City in their dated but functional burgundy Chevy Celebrity was far worse than they had imagined.

During the drive, they'd seen colossal lineups in front of gas stations that looked like something out of Baghdad after the fall of Saddam's regime. Other stations they passed had changed their signs to read: "No More Gas." In places where prices were visible, many had been jacked up to incredible levels. Some stations went as high as twenty to thirty dollars a gallon. It wasn't hard to imagine that somewhere in the city prices were even higher.

The police couldn't be everywhere at once and so it wasn't a surprise that fights were breaking out all over the place. Crowds surged in and out of grocery stores like a tsunami, clearing shelves as quickly as they could. With the power and communication infrastructures down, the chances that any of the stores would soon be resupplied was next to nil. This wasn't about starving crowds demanding food. Buck had predicted the threads of society would begin to unravel three to seven days after the SHTF. So how could things have gotten so bad so quickly?

It didn't take long to figure out the answer was fear. In fact, by this point, the fear had already transitioned into a full-blown panic. The shelves and cupboards in people's homes weren't empty, not yet at least, but the concern that they would soon be had sent people scrambling to gather up as much as they could. Watching the scenes of chaos and desperation play out around him gave Paul a new understanding and respect for Buck's beliefs. For a long time, Buck had been the punchline for many jokes about the growing paranoia in America. If anything, the vision playing out before Paul only confirmed that we lived in a society where immediate gratification took precedence over planning for the future.

This wasn't the sort of thing one contemplated on a full belly. The stabbing pangs of hunger had a funny way of putting life into perspective. If anything, Buck's warnings, which had seemed so extreme, now appeared to have been far too tame.

In front of them a minivan braked suddenly, causing Buck to do the same. Their Chevy screeched along the asphalt, coming within inches of a collision.

Buck struck the steering wheel. "Don't these people look where they're going?" he growled. "This was exactly the kind of situation I wanted to avoid. The same reason I never did my shopping on Saturdays and Sundays. I don't like crowds, I don't like people, and I can't stand how they get when they start freaking out."

The traffic slowed to a crawl. That meant there was probably an accident up ahead. Paul knew that Buck had spent years building that bunker with the express purpose of avoiding exposure during times like this. He had already explained that the idea wasn't to necessarily live there forever. The shelter was supposed to provide comfortable living for several weeks. By the time one had to leave to gather fresh supplies, the population would already have thinned out considerably.

It was a heartless idea and the way Buck had said it had been cold. Paul supposed it was easy to sometimes lose touch with the fact that they were talking about human beings, fellow Americans.

Buck would say that if people failed to prep for a day like today, they deserved what they had coming to them. It reminded Paul of the family they'd encountered on the highway, begging for gas or a lift. Buck had driven past them without blinking an eye. And so too had the woman in Platte City who'd refused to stop when they'd attempted to flag her down. "Every man for himself," that was Buck's philosophy.

Paul had never considered himself a deeply religious man, in spite of his late adoption of Christianity, which he had largely seen as a practical decision. But he couldn't help wondering about the cost of only looking out for yourself. You might win your life, but you risked losing your soul.

"I gotta say," Paul said, "I was mighty surprised you offered Wild Bill a spot in your underground lair. I mean, we needed a car, but it just seems to go against everything you stand for."

Buck glanced over at him, his right eyebrow cocked. "You insinuating that I ain't got no compassion?"

Paul thought about that for a moment. "I'm just surprised, that's all."

"I liked that old coot," Buck said. "But right then I was willing to say whatever needed saying if it got us that car. You seem to forget that we were two strangers without a penny to our name when we showed up on that guy's front stoop."

"There was a used car lot not far from the gas station," Paul replied. "I can't imagine with all of those prepper skills you've been building over the years, you failed to learn how to hotwire a car."

"What do I look like to you? A common criminal? Listen, I know lots of stuff and it ain't all about filtering water or skinning squirrels."

Paul's hands went up. "I wasn't trying to say you didn't."

"There's a reason for all these preps, you know," Buck said. "And not all of them have to do with anticipating some terrorist attack or natural disaster. I know it looks crazy from where you're sitting, but you're only seeing half the picture. The real benefit of the way I choose to live my life is true independence. The electrical grid can go down for two weeks straight. Hell, she could go down for two months and I'd be just peachy." Buck waved a hand on either side of him, pointing to the stores and gas stations along the highway. "The real benefit is that I don't need to be like the rest of these sheeple, running around like chickens with their heads cut off, attacking each other so that little baby Tommy will have something to eat tonight."

"Maybe that's true," Paul said. "And yet here you are, smack dab in the thick of things while your underground castle keep sits empty. I guess that was the one oversight in your plan."

"What oversight was that?"

"Family."



Rain clouds rolled in shortly after that, turning the sky ink black and opening up with a torrent of rain. The two men sat in silence, inching along, raindrops the size of a

fingernail battering the hood and windshield. Both of them were acutely aware of the precious gas they were wasting.

Thirty minutes later the deadlock gave way and so did the rain. The heavy traffic had been a consequence of an accident and the sheer number of cars all leaving the city at the same time. Interestingly, the other side of the highway, leading into Kansas City, was largely empty. For any plane or helicopter flying overhead, the image would've been a startling one.

"Sun's starting to go down," Buck observed, removing his hat and leaning forward so that his bushy white beard pressed against the steering wheel. "We should probably pull over somewhere and find a place to grab a bite and some shuteye."

"You mean like a motel?"

"Motel? What are you, Paris Hilton? Besides, we ain't got no money."

"You could always promise them a place in your bunker," Paul suggested, grinning.

"Funny man. Maybe I'll do just that and give them the spot I'd reserved for you."

"Well, we do have that canned beef and stew Teresa gave us."

Buck shook his head. "Nah, that's emergency food."

"Emergency what?"

"Emergency food," Buck spat with a growing hint of impatience. "You don't go eating food that can last for weeks or months unless you absolutely need to. There's no telling how long this trip will take. Besides, we still need to make it all the way home and I'm not counting on bumping into another kind old lady."

"So what are you suggesting?" Paul asked, not entirely sure he wanted to hear the answer.

A heavily forested area lined both sides of the interstate. Buck explained that they would pull off the highway, find a secure location near the woods and make camp there. But the part that really worried Paul was the dinner menu. Buck refused to tell him what they were going to eat, only that Buck would take care of it.

The rain, which had been coming down in buckets for close to an hour earlier, meant that building a fire would pretty much be impossible. That left Paul to wonder whether Buck's plan had anything to do with picking wild berries. If this was what independence felt like, Paul felt a growing conviction he didn't wanna have anything to do with it.

Chapter 26

They pulled off the highway outside of Deepwater, Missouri a few meters past Truman Lake. Most of the traffic had thinned out, allowing Buck to cut off the interstate at a break in the guardrail. Beyond was an open field which led to a lush treeline. The Celebrity's tires struggled to keep traction on the wet grass and the car fishtailed more than once. Buck brought her out of sight along a dirt road that ran along the highway, probably used by ATVs. After they stopped, Buck exited the car and went to the trunk. A minute later he returned with the length of fishing wire Travis had given them.

"You're gonna go fishing?" Paul asked, feeling like the mystery had finally been solved.

"Nope," Buck replied smugly. He proceeded to tie what he explained was a slip knot. He made more than one of them and exited the car again to search among the nearby trees for appropriately sized branches and twigs. After that he disappeared into the forest for nearly ten minutes. When he returned, Paul was out of the car, listening to the occasional car passing them by out of sight.

"Care to fill me in?" Paul asked, the cuffs of his pants along with his shoes wet from the damp grass.

Buck let himself into the car and reclined the seat, his ball cap perched over his face. "Now, we wait," he said enigmatically. He'd obviously set some kind of trap, but a trap for what? More importantly, how would they cook it? Hungry as they were, Paul wasn't going to eat anything raw. Getting sick and maybe dying from some disease wasn't worth it for Buck to prove a point.

In the fading light, Buck lay back in the driver's seat, his heavy forearms crossed over his chest.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Uh-huh," Buck said from under his cap.

"When we were at Wild Bill's place, why'd you ask him for that child's squirt gun? I mean, it just seemed like such a strange thing to ask for. I was sure you were gonna ask him for a road rocket."

Buck peeked out from under his cap. "A what?"

"A road rocket. Back when I was on tour with The Wanderers we drank them all the time."

"I'm sure you did."

"Anytime we had a beer in the tour bus or in one of the cars that followed close behind, we referred to them as road rockets."

"Oh, you thought I was gonna ask him for a beer to drink while we drove."

"Yeah, but instead you asked for a squirt gun."

"Well, we only had one real weapon."

"The shotgun," Paul said, suddenly remembering with horror the ashen look on the man's face a second before Paul had killed him. "But I don't see how a kid's toy is gonna do much. It's purple and shaped like a ray gun. You pull that on someone and you may kill them with laughter."

Buck's beard distorted ever so slightly as his cheeks rose into a smile. "Right you are, Paul. A squirt gun filled with water won't do much more than wet a man's shirt, but you fill that same gun with urine and you shoot it into a man's eyes and let me tell you, the pain he'll experience will be excruciating. It won't kill him. But it'll stun him long enough to get in close and finish him off with your bare hands." Buck held his thick fingers in front of him, flexing them at the knuckle till the joints popped one by one.

"Oh," Paul replied, blinking away the imaginary sensation.

Buck glanced down at his wrist watch. "Okay, it's time." He sprang to his feet and made his way into the forest, Paul close on his heels. It seemed like the old guy had more tricks up his sleeve than Paul had given him credit for.

They went to where Buck had laid out the first snare and found it empty. The second was far luckier. A possum struggled in vain to free itself from the slip knot. Buck moved in quickly, scooping a thick branch off the ground and clubbing the animal on the head.

"You wanna be clean and merciful," Buck said. "No need for the thing to suffer."

Paul nodded. He almost felt like he should be taking notes. Buck cleared an empty space off of a fallen log and used his pocket knife to skin the creature. The guts he threw into the forest, away from the place where they'd eventually make camp.

"I've never had possum," Paul said, his face squished up.

"Don't worry. It smells real nasty, but tastes a lot like pork."

"How you gonna cook it?" Paul asked, eyeing the damp forest floor.

Buck pointed to their right. "I found a standing dead pine tree over there. Even though it's wet outside, the wood inside is dry and powdery. The process is real simple—even you could do it, Paul. You peel some bark off a tree to use as a base, then shave bits of dead pine wood in increasingly bigger pieces. The idea is to grow the fire slowly so that by the time you put on the damp pieces of wood, you've already built up a decent amount of coals."

"That makes sense. So I guess we gotta gather some wood to keep it going."

"Not we, Paul. You. I'll get the dead pine and build the spit to roast the possum."

Paul turned to do his job and then stopped. "I suppose you're going to light the fire by rubbing two sticks together, or is that my job too?"

Grinning, Buck reached into his pocket and produced a lighter. "No, I think we'll leave that one to Mr. Bic."

Ten minutes later the possum was roasting over a nice fire. Buck explained he normally preferred cooking this sort of meat over hot coals, but they didn't have the luxury of getting fancy. When it was ready, Buck cut some flesh off with his pocket knife and handed it to Paul. It was too hot at first to eat, and Paul cradled it in a plate of small leaves he'd made. When it cooled, he took a bite.

"Not bad," he said. "You're right, it does taste like pork and it's just as greasy."

Buck nodded, dangling a chunk over his mouth before dropping it in.

Paul pointed to the old man's face. "You've got some in your beard there, Barv."

"Don't you start with that again," Buck said. "I could see the way your face lit up whenever he called me that. You were having a ball, weren't you?"

Paul had been, although the idea of having fun under the circumstances only accentuated the heavy weight in his heart. He stuck his hand into the knapsack that Travis and Teresa had given them when his fingers struck something hard. He removed the mystery object, discovering a mickey of Jack Daniels.

Paul let out a whoop. "If we make it out of this," Paul said, cheering the sky and undoing the cap before taking a sip, "I'm going to recommend that couple for a sainthood."

He passed the bottle to Buck who took a small swig and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Last time I drank out of a bottle like this," Paul said, "we were opening for Def Leppard at Madison Square Garden. Our biggest gig to date. Twenty thousand drunken and rowdy fans chanting, 'Start the show, start the show,' and there I was backstage feeling like my heart was about to explode. The room was spinning like you wouldn't believe. I mean, you spend your whole life praying for a moment like this and then when it comes you aren't sure if you've got the courage to walk out on that stage."

"I said I was backstage, but what I didn't tell you was that I was on the can. The drummer, Rick Allen, knocks on the door and says, 'You all right in there, mate?' I told him I wasn't sure. He probably thought I was doing a line of coke, but I never touched the stuff."

"He pushes his way in and hands me a bottle of JD. He's only got one arm—not sure if you knew that or not, but when a one-armed drummer hands you a bottle of booze, you take it. And I did and gulped half of it down."

Paul looked over at Buck, who was listening with a skeptical look on his face. "When I got out on stage I realized I'd forgotten the words to every song we'd ever written. It was straight out of a nightmare, like the ones where you get to school only to realize you've got no pants on. So I got to the mic and held it for a minute, the crowd chanting so loud I couldn't hear myself think. But through the noise I heard the music start up. By the third bar the first line still wasn't there, but I decided to start singing whatever came to mind. To this day, I don't remember what words I was belting out, but women were showering me with panties and bras. It was a crazy night and one hell of a crazy life and I gave all of it up to marry Susan. And let me tell you," Paul said, pausing briefly, "if I had to do it over, I'd do the same thing."

"I'll bet those twenty thousand fans were just wondering when that drunk fool was gonna get off stage so the real concert could begin."

Paul cackled laughter. "I never thought of that, but you may be right."

"They woulda thrown tomatoes, but all they had on hand were panties and bras."

"Okay, now you've gone too far."

Now both men erupted into gut-splitting laughter.

After a while, when the laughing had died down, Paul grew quiet. "You think they're all right?" he asked Buck, knowing the old man couldn't possibly have the answer to that question.

"Susan's no pushover," Buck said, licking his fingers. "I can guarantee you that."

The urge to check his cellphone for a signal took hold of Paul and he shifted the food to his other hand as he dug into his pocket. The empty feeling made his heart skip a beat as he remembered he didn't have the phone anymore. Those two criminals at the gas station had taken it. One of them had been named Daryl. The other he only knew as a skinny, toothless man who was probably in his thirties, but looked far older.

That was when another thought occurred to Paul. He jabbed his hand in his other pocket, knowing the act was a futile one, but trying it all the same.

"The note," he said, fear clawing at his throat.

Buck stopped what he was doing. "What is it now?"

“The note I showed you in the car, before we stopped for gas. The one where I’d written down Autumn’s name and address.”

Buck’s voice dropped an octave or two. “Yeah, what about it?”

“I didn’t think too much of it at the time, because of the bullets and the killing, but one of them took it from me. They knew it was someone important, someone we were heading to see.”

The muscles in Buck’s face fell flat. “And you can bet your sweet behind that when they can’t find us, they’ll head down there to grab the girls.”

“God, I hope you’re wrong.” But even as Paul spoke the words, he knew deep down that Susan and Autumn were in even greater danger than before.

Chapter 27

With that unsettling realization, the two men gathered the last of the food they'd made and hopped back into the Chevy Celebrity. The plan was to drive through the night. They would even break Buck's rule of conserving the canned food and eat while they drove where necessary.

For a while, they made great time, slowing down here and there to avoid abandoned or crashed vehicles. Most of the wrecks they encountered were empty. In the few that were not, the driver was deceased. Buck said he knew a handful of first-aid techniques, not that any of those would have helped the unfortunate souls they'd found.

More than once, Buck insisted that they be vigilant for stopped cars since they might be walking into an ambush. They'd already fallen victim to one such incident near Platte City and he swore it wouldn't happen again.

Paul had tried to explain that there was no way they could have known the station had been co-opted by a gang of escaped convicts from Fort Leavenworth prison. Still, the need to be careful remained.

At night, the interstate was particularly eerie. For a stretch, the occasional car would travel alongside them, the occupants staring back, probably asking themselves the same thing Paul was.

"Where are they heading to at this time of night? A cabin somewhere in the woods? Or are they off to rescue someone?"

For the most part, Buck didn't concern himself with the other travelers who crossed their path, other than to swear under his breath whenever they wandered into his lane or neglected to use their turning signals.

There was a bizarre connection between people now, one born out of living through a tragic event. More and more, Paul could see it in the empty and shadowed faces looking back at him. Sure, they were doing what they could to protect the people around them. But Paul was also sure many more were wondering what lay in store for the country after it had been dealt such a terrible blow. The very fabric of civilized society was starting to crumble, a process that would only accelerate in the coming days. Without proper communication, it was hard for the average person to gauge the level of damage. How many cities had been destroyed? A handful? A dozen? Or could it be double that number?

This was probably one of the major reasons he couldn't get any cell reception. The moment the power went out, everyone had run for their landlines and cellphones. Paul knew that cell towers had batteries and generators that would last for hours, perhaps even days, in the event that the grid was taken down. He'd read an article back in 2012 about how after Hurricane Sandy a few million Americans along the eastern seaboard couldn't turn their lights on, but still had access to spotty cell reception.

He tried not to think about his Blackberry, taken by those thugs at the Phillips 66 when they robbed him and Buck of nearly everything they had, almost including their

lives. Be that as it might, unless they came upon someone with a cell and it happened by chance to get a signal, there was no way he could get a hold of Susan.

Not long after, as the two men barreled through the darkness, their headlights catching yellow lines flying by like blasts from a giant laser gun, Buck began to grumble.

"I just hope those fat cats aren't behind this," he muttered.

Paul paused and studied Buck's face in the dim light. In spite of the clutch of white hair on his face, it was clear that he was clenching his jaw. "What are you talking about?"

Buck glanced over and then back to the road. "Oh, never mind."

"You hope the fat cats aren't behind what?" Paul asked, curious for the old man to make some sense.

"This mess we're in," Buck shot back. "I was just saying that I hope this whole thing wasn't some scheme cooked up by the bankers and the elites to usher in a New World Order."

"New World Order?" Paul had never heard the term used like that before.

"Oh, come on, Paul, after all the time we've spent together, you can't be that naïve. You don't actually think our government runs this country, do you?"

Paul was quiet for a moment. "Uh, yeah, I guess I did. At least when there was a country to run. Does that makes me naïve?"

"Look, if you can't see the world the way it is, there ain't much more I can say to help you."

"You're entitled to your opinion, Buck. It's just that you're stating something as a fact like everyone should take it on faith as the gospel. It sounds like you're claiming some evil cabal of crusty white men in suits secretly controls the world."

"Ever heard of OPEC?"

"Yeah, it was put in place to protect oil-producing nations who'd been raped and pillaged of their resources for years," Paul shot back. "Imagine a foreign government had been pumping US wells dry. How would we like that?" It was beginning to seem as though the two of them could only get along when they avoided certain subjects. "You're the one who brought up this New World Order stuff without offering any evidence to back it up. Please tell me you're not going to start telling me that 9/11 was an inside job."

Buck changed lanes to avoid a slow-moving car. "Does that sound so crazy?"

"Yes, it does."

"You liberals live in a fantasy land."

Paul shook his head. "Who said I was a liberal?"

"Well, you sure do sound like one sometimes."

"And if I'd served in the military you'd be singing my praises, the way you always talk about Kevin as though he was the greatest guy on earth."

"Don't you disparage his name," Buck hissed. "You ain't half the man he was."

"Maybe not, but you might not know him as well as you think you do."

Buck snapped a look at Paul as though searching for a tell that he was bluffing.

"What kinda nonsense are you on about now?"

"Did you know he used to beat your daughter?"

A long, pregnant silence filled the Chevy.

"That's bull."

"I'll take that as a no," Paul said. "That black eye Susan told you she got bringing a basket of laundry upstairs. Well, let's just say she wasn't being completely truthful."

"You're saying she lied to me?"

"Of course she lied. She knew you loved that boy like a son and knew even better what you'd do to him if you ever discovered the truth."

Buck was shaking his head.

"Look, Buck, I didn't mean for you to find out this way, but you talked about not being blind to the truth and I agree with you. I also know nothing good ever comes from worshiping false idols. He and Susan were dumb kids who married young and didn't have a clue what they were doing. I'm sure he loved your daughter. I won't take that away from him. I just think he wasn't the knight in shining armor you make him out to be."

Another long pause and Paul began to feel the creeping threads of guilt over what he'd said. It was the truth, sure, but tearing down a man's heroes wasn't something to be taken lightly.

The two didn't say a word for the next two hours. During that time, Paul tilted his head back and enjoyed the temporary ceasefire.

Chapter 28

The sun rose as they reached the outskirts of Jonesboro, Arkansas. Soft sunlight bathed the tops of the trees as well as the odd wrecked vehicle that dotted the interstate. Paul did a double-take as one of those wrecks drew closer. The vehicle was wide and yellow and looked an awful lot like Buck's Hummer.

Beside him, the old man saw it at about the same time and the expression on his face told Paul that he was wondering the same thing. It was only when they roared by at nearly seventy miles an hour that Paul saw two men standing beside the vehicle, peeing into the drainage ditch that ran beside the highway. Even from a side angle, Paul recognized one of them as the man who'd emptied his pockets, stealing his cellphone and the scrap of paper where he'd written Autumn's address.

If the rest of the gang was with them, neither Paul nor Buck had seen them. The stock of the shotgun was resting against Paul's leg, the barrel nudged into the carpet beside his feet. He closed his fingers around its smooth finish. "Should we turn back?" Paul asked, his pulse beginning to race.

Buck slowed the Chevy down to forty. He seemed to be contemplating the idea. Paul didn't have the same tactical training as Buck, but even he wondered whether a frontal assault would only get them both killed.

"I got an idea," Buck said, sliding the car onto the shoulder where he stopped and removed the key. "Those two should be along here any moment. And my guess is they wouldn't pass up an opportunity to rob a stranded motorist. Course this would work much better if you were a woman," Buck said, looking Paul up and down. "And well endowed. But I'm afraid you'll have to do." After popping the hood, he quickly got out and braced it with the hood prop.

Paul got out of the car with the shotgun and Buck took it from him, handing him the squirt gun instead. Paul glanced down at the child's toy in his hand, disgusted.

Buck motioned with the barrel of the gun toward the gully right next to them. "I'm gonna hide down there, about twenty feet ahead of the Chevy. You just stand here on the side of the road, waving your arms as they pass by. My guess is they're gonna stop, but if they do, it won't be to give you a hand. Soon as they do, that's when you hightail it back to the Chevy and hunker down behind the engine block. Then you just let me do the rest."

"So you're using me as bait," Paul said, beginning to wonder whether a frontal assault was such a bad idea after all. Either Buck didn't hear him, or didn't care, because he was already down in the gully mucking through six inches of water as he moved into position.

Less than three minutes later, the Hummer appeared in the distance, first looking like little more than a toy car. That was when Paul's heart really started to hammer against his ribcage. His mind raced with the possibility that the convicts might simply use him as drive-by target practice, the way kids in the fifties used to hammer mailboxes with baseball bats from a moving car.

They were about fifty meters away when Paul began waving his arms, positioning himself toward the front of the Chevy. This way if there was any indication of a drive-by, he could dive into the drainage ditch before he got shot.

To his surprise the Hummer began to slow down and the driver—the man named Daryl who had stolen his things—said something to his companion. Although Paul couldn't hear what was said, the sneering expression on their faces spoke volumes.

The Hummer pulled in front of the Chevy and both men got out. For a moment, Paul could only see Daryl, who had the grip of a pistol sticking out from the waistband of his pants. Paul really hoped that Buck's plan, whatever it was, worked.

"Got yourself some car trouble?" the convict with a pistol asked him.

Both men had drawn about even with the back of the Hummer when Paul got a better look at the second convict. He had a shock of deep red hair and pale skin which made him look more like a high-school kid than a cold-blooded killer.

The smug look on Daryl's face turned to shock.

"Hey, I know you," he started to say when the air was rocked by the deafening sound of a shotgun blast. The red-haired convict's chest exploded in a crimson mist, his body thrown face first into the gravel.

Daryl's eyes grew wide with shock and terror as he went for his pistol. For a split second, Paul contemplated reaching for the squirt gun filled with urine, but quickly realized he'd be dead long before he got a chance to blind his opponent.

He scrambled for the driver's side door of the Chevy, his chest heaving with fear. Three shots rang out. The first ricocheted off the asphalt six feet in front of him. The second grazed the left side of his skull, tearing a gash near his temple. The third was a different sound altogether—the thunderous boom from Buck's shotgun. Paul turned back in time to hear his assailant yelp with pain as he tumbled to the ground, a sizable chunk torn out of the left side of his hip. The pistol flew from his hand and skittered several feet away.

"You killed Huckleberry," was the first thing Daryl screamed, clutching his hip while blood oozed out between his fingers.

"You stole my truck," Buck replied. "I'd like to say that we're even, but I got a gut feeling we haven't even started."

Paul ran over and grabbed the man's pistol.

"Where you headed, Daryl?" Buck asked matter-of-factly.

Daryl winced from the pain. Already he was beginning to look pale as the life force slowly drained out of him. He looked like he really didn't want to answer the question.

"I saw your friends weren't in the Hummer," Buck stated, "which means they're either somewhere behind us or somewhere ahead. So I'll ask you again, where were you guys headed to?"

"Just give me something for the pain. It hurts so much. Give me something for the pain and I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"I'm not in the habit of negotiating with criminals," Buck said. "But I'll tell you what we'll do. You tell me what I want to know, as quickly as you can, and I'll give you something for the pain."

"There should be some morphine in the back of the Hummer," Paul said. "Unless you boys took everything we had."

Buck stood expressionless over the wounded Daryl, waiting for his answer.

Daryl took a final glance down at the bloody mess which used to be his hip and gave in. "A-Atlanta," he stuttered. "We couldn't find the two of you and so Finch

decided he would take the next best thing."

The only visible area of Buck's face not covered by that thick white beard reddened with anger. Paul was also fuming, but to him a far better solution was to get back on the road as soon as possible and leave this guy here to die.

"Finch?" Buck said. "He the one I stabbed in the eye?"

Daryl nodded. "I've never seen anyone double-cross Finch without regretting it. He's got a real stubborn streak in him."

Paul pointed a thumb at the old man. "He doesn't know Buck very well then. You spend a couple of days with this guy and you'll see what I mean."

"So where are they?" Buck asked, and just as he did the crackle from a radio sounded from somewhere nearby. The two men searched around before they discovered the noise was coming from a walkie-talkie attached to the redhead, Huckleberry.

"D-man, stop messing around and answer me."

"How many of you are in Finch's gang?" Buck demanded, snatching the walkie from Huck's belt.

"Us and four others. Come on, man. I've told you everything I know. Get me some help."

"Name them."

"Shouldn't we get him something first?" Paul suggested.

"Shut up," Buck barked. "Name them!"

"Finch, Sweets, Jax, and PJ."

"Who's the skinny one with the bad teeth?" Paul asked.

Daryl's head fell back against the pavement. "Jax."

"So are they ahead or behind us?"

"They're close to Memphis," Daryl said in a whisper now.

The two men exchanged a look. That meant they were about an hour ahead.

Daryl's face was as white as a bed sheet.

"I think we need to help him," Paul said.

"What are we gonna do?" Buck asked incredulously. "Bring him to a doctor?"

"What about the morphine? At least to take the pain away."

Buck racked the shotgun, aimed it at Daryl's face and fired just as Paul screamed for him to stop.

Paul's hands covered his face in horror at the sight of what remained of the dead man's head. "I can't believe you just did that."

"You gotta grow a pair, Paul. That civilized world you keep clinging to ain't nothing but a fart in the wind right now. Take a second to imagine what either of these two gangsta wannabes woulda done to Autumn and Susan if they'd gotten there first. And every time you feel your heart growing soft, just conjure up that image in your mind once again."

Paul shook his head. Somehow killing the man at the gas station hadn't been nearly as hard.

"You didn't get a chance to talk to him," that little voice whispered. "Once you get a name that human part of you takes over and makes the act of killing so much harder."

That was the narrow tightrope each of them was now teetering on. A tightrope that stretched high above a windy canyon. They were clinging to their humanity and Paul couldn't help feeling that his own was on the verge of toppling over the side, lost forever in a darkened chasm.

Chapter 29

They quickly moved the bodies off the road, rolling them into the drainage ditch, but not before they collected the convicts' weapons—a Beretta and a S&W 9mm. Apart from the walkie, the two men had little else of value.

The urge to use the radio to taunt Finch and his men was strong, almost blinding, but they suppressed it. Sure, it might give them a sliver of delicious satisfaction to unnerve the men who were racing to kill their family. But that would eliminate the element of surprise, one of the few advantages Paul and Buck had going for them.

Afterward, Buck reversed the Hummer into position beside the Chevy so they could siphon gas from the car to the truck. In spite of it not being as fuel-efficient, they'd decided to continue on in the Hummer. Never mind that it was Buck's prized possession, Paul knew well enough by now, but if the old man felt keeping it was an impediment to their progress, he'd have left it behind in a heartbeat. What it provided them with was an extra level of protection as well as the ability to push cars out of the way and go off-roading whenever necessary.

The problem was that the tank on the Chevy was close to empty and she didn't provide more than a few gallons of fuel. Added to that, only one of the jerry cans on the back contained any fuel. They would have enough to get them as far as Memphis, but not much further.

After transferring their things to the Hummer, they took inventory of what was left from the supplies Buck had originally loaded into her. The bug-out bags were gone, although some of the items once packed inside lay strewn about in the back as though the gang members had pilfered them one by one, looking for anything useful. Two hazmat suits remained along with the Geiger counter. There was even a two-inch stack of twenties, fifties and hundred-dollar bills the gang must have robbed from anyone who crossed their path. But it was the next discovery which prompted Buck to let out a little whoop of delight: his AR-15 and a box containing nearly a hundred rounds.

The inside of the Hummer was a testament to how sloppy these guys were. The front and back floorboards were covered with junk food wrappers. Most of it looked like the kind of stuff pillaged from convenience stores. Bags of chips, candy bars, empty soda cans. It was a wonder Jax and the rest of these thugs had any teeth left at all.

And this was where Paul made a discovery of his own. Wedged between the passenger seat and the console was his Blackberry. Perhaps in the old days, the device might have sold on the street for a few hundred bucks, but right now they were near worthless. Paul brought it out of sleep mode and scanned the display, looking to see if he had a signal. Finding none, he slipped it back into his pocket, hoping at some point that might change.

"Let's get this out of the way fast then," Buck said, handing Paul the Beretta 9mm. "Things are only gonna get hairier from here on in and I wanna make sure you can at least hit the broad side of a barn when the time comes."

Paul took the pistol and aimed it at the ground.

"First things first, I want you to hit that road sign," Buck told him.

"The one that says fifty miles an hour?"

"That's the one."

Paul shrugged, raised the hand with the pistol and took a shot. It went wide.

"First off, holding a gun ain't like holding a guitar. Place your two hands on the grip, here and here. Your finger always stays off the trigger till you're ready to apply lethal force. Face the target with your legs about shoulder width apart, and bring your gun foot back just a bit."

Paul did as Buck told him, holding the pistol with both hands.

"Good, now bend your knees a touch more and when you're ready, squeeze the trigger. Don't jam it like you seen in those movies. A gentle squeeze is all you need."

Paul fired the Beretta and the bullet hit, making a loud ding.

"How'd that feel?"

"Pretty good." Paul glanced over at him. "Guess that makes me a lethal weapon like you, doesn't it?"

Buck frowned. "Don't push your luck."

With precious seconds slipping by, the two quickly finished prepping the Hummer before they jumped back on the road. They hadn't been travelling for more than a few minutes when Paul removed his shoes and felt his toes dip into a hole in the floorboard. Glancing down, he saw several holes at his feet. He pulled up the car mat and shook his head.

"What is it?" Buck asked him.

"I think they're bullet holes," Paul replied.

Buck leaned over, taking his eyes off the road for a second. "Animals," he spat. "Nothing but a two-bit pair of animals. If I'd known I would left him there to suffer."

Paul put the carpet back. "Taking a life can't be as easy as you make it sound," Paul said, still picturing the way Daryl's head looked after Buck had opened it up with the shotgun.

"I ain't killed a man since the war, you know," Buck admitted, tugging down the brim of his cap to block the rising sun.

Well, that's comforting, Paul thought, but didn't say. Might explain some of the pent-up anger brewing in the years since then. For some men, killing had a way of relaxing them. He wondered if the same was true for Buck.

"Got drafted in sixty-nine," Buck said after a moment. "Was a crazy time." He looked over at Paul who shook his head.

"I'm sure it was. I wasn't born then."

Buck nodded and let out a little growl as if to say, "Damn right you weren't." "I was one of those bright-eyed and bushy-tailed believers, just like you. Short-cropped hair, believed nearly everything I was told and eager to kick some Commie butt. I fought for the cause, even after seeing good soldiers, friends of mine, die for what I thought was the greater good. I'm sure by now you've seen enough of those Vietnam War movies to get a taste for what was really going on. Military's come a long way since then, I gotta give it to them. To be blunt, South East Asia wasn't their finest hour. I finally had enough when my unit was sent into a suspected Viet Cong village with orders to raze it to the ground. They didn't want any prisoners. It wasn't about winning hearts and

minds back then. It was about denying the enemy safe havens and taking the fight to the civilian population....”

Buck was still talking about his days in Vietnam when Paul spotted a convoy moving on the interstate in the opposite direction. It was a strange mishmash of black SUVs, Humvees, eighteen-wheelers, and a flatbed truck. A corner of a tarp covering the flatbed hadn't been properly secured and was flapping in the wind. Underneath were what looked like artifacts from the museum. Classical statues and stone tablets and who knew what else.

“What do you think that's all about?” Buck asked.

“My guess is the government's trying to save what's left of civilization.”

Buck looked at him quizzically. “What's left?”

“Yeah, you know paintings, historical treasures. That sort of thing.”

The convoy roared by and Buck leaned forward to catch the tail end in his side mirror. “You know what that means, don't you?” he said and it sounded like another one of his rhetorical questions.

“I imagine it means a lot of things. The situation in the cities has probably deteriorated and the government wants to prevent looting of precious objects. They saw what happened in Baghdad after Saddam's regime fell and I'm sure this is only the first of many such trips. Of course, we don't know what they had in the belly of that eighteen-wheeler,” Paul went on. “But I'm sure important state and federal documents won't be far behind.”

“Well, as far as I see things,” Buck said with a touch of venom in his voice, “it means the government's given up on the people. You can't tell me this sort of thing isn't going on all over the country right now. Don't you think those men would be put to better use helping to restore law and order?”

“Maybe,” Paul said. “But for all we know things have gotten too far out of hand.”

Buck nodded. “The Feds are always looking out for number one. Which is why I asked you a second ago what you thought it meant. Those trucks ain't going just anywhere. I'd be willing to bet a pretty penny they're heading to some top-secret bunker.”

Paul was about to contradict that view when he realized what the old man was saying made perfect sense. He'd read an article once about a top-secret bunker designed for Congress in the event of a nuclear holocaust. It was built in plain sight, right under people's noses, and stayed a secret for decades before some reporter stumbled onto it and blew the whistle. If DC wasn't a nuclear wasteland, then Paul was sure that that bunker and many others like it around the country were being filled with the chosen few. The lucky ones the government had deemed worthy to live and carry on. But even if the Feds labelled people like he and Buck a lost cause, Paul wasn't going to lie down and die, even if the country came crumbling down around them.

Chapter 30

Crumbling was also on Susan's mind as she slowly came awake in Autumn's bedroom. Reaching over, she felt for her daughter and realized she was gone. The sheets on her side were still warm, which meant she couldn't have been gone long. In her groggy state, Susan vaguely remembered Autumn saying something about going to the washroom to clean up. The water had stopped for good yesterday and they'd been reduced to using water filled in pots and buckets for both hygiene and hydration. On the couch in the living room Chet snored loudly.

Susan was doing her best to stay strong for her daughter, trying to keep at bay her own doubts that Paul would ever make it to them. Chet's presence helped some. He was little more than a college student, maybe nineteen or twenty, but already he'd helped keep them from being attacked by the two men who'd stalked and nearly killed them. Although she'd seen a glimmer of something in his eyes when the soldier from the National Guard had showed up to save the day. Was it suspicion or something else? Jealousy?

Susan opened her eyes and checked her cellphone. The battery was down to about ten percent but more importantly she still had no signal. She'd seen half a bar appear late last night as she got ready for bed and had frantically dialed Paul's phone, only to be sent directly to his voicemail. Technology had a wonderful way of simplifying our lives or making them a living Hell when they didn't work.

It was at about that same time that Susan thought she heard a strange noise. At first she assumed it was the steady rhythm of Chet's snoring, but now, listening closely, she could hear that that had stopped altogether. No, this wasn't snoring, this was something else. It was the muffled sound of a woman in distress.

Susan jumped out of bed and rushed into the living room, half expecting to find the front door to the apartment ajar. But it wasn't. She scanned over toward the couch and saw a pile of crumpled sheets, but no Chet. Then she heard the noise again, this time from the bathroom, and with stark horror immediately became aware of what was happening.

Susan rushed in. Chet had Autumn bent over the sink, pushing her down with his left hand, while with his right he was trying to pull down her pyjama bottoms. Susan fell on top of him right away, pounding on his back with everything she had. Chet swung his fist back into Susan's face, knocking her backwards against the far wall. An explosion of stars burst before her eyes as the world threatened to go black. In that split second of time she had seen Chet's soulless eyes and she knew the two of them were about to die.

His hand was covering Autumn's mouth and she bit his fingers and tried to kick him with her powerful legs. He squealed in pain and grabbed a handful of her hair, using it to bash her head against the sink. Gripped by terror, Susan stumbled out of the bathroom and went for the knife that was under her pillow.

Autumn continued crying out for help as Susan raced back in and raised the knife over her head. Somehow, as quickly as things were happening, she still had time to remember something Buck had told her years ago. A knife in the back could be blocked by the ribcage and if you wanted it to go all the way in you had to turn the blade at an angle. Without thinking, she did just that and jammed it down into his back, plunging it as far as it would go. He let out a strange, sickly sort of moan as his body went limp and slid to the ground.

Turning, Autumn looked down at Chet's dead body and covered her mouth with her hands before she let out a silent scream. Susan whisked her from the bathroom before making a final check that Chet was no longer living. They hugged each other tightly after that, both of them still in shock. But Susan knew that the worst was yet to come. Warranted as she felt in killing Chet, she now had a dead body lying on the floor of the bathroom. With no cops to call and a police force stretched so thin they probably wouldn't respond even if she could get through, Susan wondered how much longer they'd be able to stay in the apartment.

Chapter 31

Paul and Buck both watched the fuel gauge on the Hummer as the needle sank past the letter E. Thirty minutes earlier, as they'd sped toward Memphis, a warning had come over the walkie-talkie that the streets in the city proper were gridlocked.

Like the other radio traffic from Finch's men they'd been listening in on, Buck and Paul had fought the urge to answer back. As far as the gang was concerned, Daryl and Huckleberry were having radio trouble, but weren't far behind, and that was exactly what they wanted them to believe. From what they could gather, the gang was driving in two separate vehicles, stopping every now and then to steal fuel and kill anyone who stood in their way. But entering a big city had come with a warning from Finch to behave themselves until they worked their way through. He promised that once they got to Atlanta, they would have all the fun they could handle.

Hearing that had made Paul's jaw clench. Buck's foot pressed down harder on the accelerator.

The news about traffic conditions in Memphis also had one additional effect. It prompted Paul and Buck to go around the city instead of through it. Buck was convinced in the long run that it would save them time and maybe even shoot them out ahead of Finch and his men.

But as the six-litre engine had continued to gulp down the last of the gas tank's reserves, they still hadn't come across an operational gas station or an abandoned car that hadn't already been emptied.

Before long one of their biggest fears came true. The Hummer gave a final sputter as it ran out of gas and slowed to a crawl. That last push allowed Buck to guide it onto the shoulder where it finally died.

Paul got out and stood by the side of the highway. There wasn't much traffic in either direction. Seemed most folks were either heading north or south on their way out of town or scrambling from store to store to secure whatever supplies hadn't already been taken.

Buck got out, plucked the cap off his head and slapped the end against the side of his pants. The shotgun was resting on the front seat, ready for action if anyone came looking for trouble.

Just then a car roared by honking as Buck waved his arms for them to stop. Then another sped by in the opposite direction.

"Any ideas?" Paul asked. "Maybe if we each take a gas can we can walk till we find somewhere to scavenge some fuel."

There weren't many options. With Finch and his men already ahead of them, they couldn't afford to wait for a Good Samaritan. Paul went around to the back of the

Hummer and was in the process of removing two of the gas cans when a car pulled off the highway and stopped behind them.

The car itself was a candy-apple-red 1964 Chevy Impala lowrider, the kind that looked far more at home in the gang-infested streets of South Central L.A., and the figures sitting inside did nothing to dispel that notion. Each of the Impala's doors opened at once as four Hispanic men exited the vehicle. From Paul's vantage point he could see the two closest to him had pistols. One on the right had a hunting rifle and the last man had a baseball bat.

The semi-automatic Beretta 9mm Paul had taken from Daryl was tucked into the waistband of his pants and he reached for it at about the same time that Buck appeared next him wielding the shotgun.

"Having car trouble?" one of the strangers asked.

Buck gripped the shotgun a little tighter. "That's close enough. The last time someone stopped to give us a hand, things got real ugly."

The four Hispanic men became tense.

Paul was trying to read the situation. Had these guys stopped to rob them or offer them help?

"Listen," Paul said. "We aren't looking for any trouble. We just need some gas."

One of the men pointed down the road with his pistol. "There's a station, maybe ten miles down the road," he said. His skin was darker than the others and he was by far the oldest.

Buck quickly racked the shotgun, bringing it into a firing position. All four men did the same, including Paul, and suddenly it looked like things were rapidly getting out of hand.

"Folks who show up to help don't start waving guns around," Buck said. "I've been around the block before. I know a group of gangbangers when I see 'em."

"Who are you calling gangbangers, Santa Claus?" the older one said, his pistol aimed at Buck's head. He turned to Paul. "Your friend is a real redneck, you know that?"

Paul tilted his head in agreement.

"Whose side are you on?" Buck barked. "Listen, gentleman, we don't need your help, so why don't you just get back in your car and drive away?"

"We stop to help you gringos and this is the way we're treated? We should leave the two of you here to rot."

"Don't listen to him," Paul stammered. "We don't really think you're gang members. Look, we've been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours. My wife and daughter are in danger...."

The older Hispanic man's eyes narrowed, his lips curling down into a thoughtful expression. "Do I know you?"

Paul was positive he'd never met any of these men before. "Not unless you boys are from Greenwood, Nebraska."

The older man continued to stare until his eyes lit up. "You aren't Paul Edwards, the lead singer from The Wanderers, are you?" he asked.

The gun in Paul's hand sagged. Even Buck glanced over in surprise.

"Hey, you're right, it looks just like him," the guy with the baseball bat said.

"I loved your music, man," the older one said. "I just wanted you to know you inspired me years ago to quit my deadbeat job and start my own band."

"I did?" Paul replied, stupefied.

"Yes. This is them," he said, waving his hand toward the other three men. "Please allow me to introduce you to El Niño, the best mariachi band north of the Mexican border." The men then threw their weapons into the car and fished out four guitars, launching into an impromptu mariachi version of *That's Amore*.

For once, even Buck was speechless.

Once they'd finished, they proceeded to introduce themselves. The older one with the acoustic guitar was Jose. Playing the five-string was Vicente, on base was Salvador and on rhythm was Cuco.

"I did love your hit *Take Me All the Way*," Jose told him. "But for me The Wanderers were about so much more. *Alice*, *Drop Your Keys* and *Don't Deny My Love*. Those songs were where the real magic happened."

"I wrote those," Paul said, still feeling numb from the neck down. "Sam Watson wrote *Take Me All the Way* on the back of a cocktail napkin at a bar one night. And it seemed that every day after the release, that was all anyone wanted to hear. I got so sick of the crowds begging for it everywhere we went." For a moment, Paul forgot he was standing in the stifling summer heat along a highway hundreds of miles from home.

"Would you do us a great honor," Jose said, "and play *Alice*, *Drop Your Keys*?"

"Oh, I don't know," Paul said, feeling bashful. "I mean, I do own a music store in Nebraska, but it's been a while since anyone asked for—"

A nudge from Buck. "Play the damned song."

Cuco handed him a guitar and Paul reluctantly took it, pulling the strap over his head. He spent a moment tuning it before he started to play. The four mariachi men stood transfixed, even as a truck sped by and drowned out Paul's singing for a second. They clapped when he finished, all except for Buck.

"I never understood why the band broke up," Jose said.

"He finally got his head screwed on straight," Buck cut in.

"We had a creative difference of opinion, I guess you could say. Sort of like Buck and I. They wanted to make fast food and I wanted to make something a little deeper, even if it didn't sell nearly as well." Paul rubbed his hands together. "So, about that gas."

Chapter 32

The station Jose brought them to was pumping gas from underground storage tanks using a long hose and a nozzle which acted as a vacuum pump when the handle was squeezed. The only bad part was that it cost them every penny of that stack of bills they'd found in the back of the Hummer. After the Hummer was filled up, the two groups said their goodbyes and wished each other well. Jose and his band were heading east toward Jackson, Tennessee to meet up with their families.

When they were twenty miles from Atlanta, Paul's Blackberry chimed, indicating there was a voice message. That was the first sign he had of a signal. What it also meant was that someone had tried to call him. He quickly dialed Susan's number and felt a moment of despair as it was picked up by the answering machine. He pulled the cellphone away from his ear and stared at it for a moment, as though waiting for it to tell him what to do next.

He dialed in to check his own missed messages. Each of them was from Susan and they spanned the moment the nukes had detonated to sometime last night. The sound of her soft voice brought tears to his eyes. With each message she'd left, her fear had become more and more visceral. In her last message, she wondered out loud if he was still even alive and for some reason that weighed on his heart most of all.

"Anything?" Buck asked.

Paul shook his head. "What's left of the cell infrastructure is under so much pressure that we've been playing the world's most soul-crushing version of phone tag."

That was when the traffic, which had been light, began to thicken. Soon, just like their approach to Kansas City, things began to slow down.

"I would think people would be rushing to leave the city," Paul said with surprise.

Buck glanced over to the other side of the interstate. The cars heading out of Atlanta were stacked more heavily than those going in.

"We could be looking at people from the country moving in to get relatives stuck in the suburbs and downtown core," Buck suggested.

It was only as they drew closer that they realized the highway leading into Atlanta was blockaded by a row of military Humvees. What looked like National Guardsmen in yellow hazmat suits were diverting the oncoming traffic south onto highway 285.

Buck stopped next to one, who was waving an orange LED traffic baton.

"I'm sorry, sir," the soldier said, not a day over eighteen years of age. "But no one's allowed in the city."

"But my daughter's all alone."

He shook his head. Surely this wasn't the first time he'd heard such an excuse. "There's nothing I can do. Now please move along."

Buck merged back into traffic, following the flow as it was diverted onto highway 285.

Already, Paul was leafing through the map book, looking for alternative routes into Atlanta. "If we can get on to the 166 heading east, we might be able to skirt around these roadblocks."

They drove for another twenty minutes, bumper-to-bumper, as the mass of vehicles made its way south. At last they saw the exit to Highway 166 East.

"There she is," Paul shouted, pointing. But he was no sooner done than he caught sight of more troops.

Buck shook his head with disgust. "We've come too far to turn around now."

Paul watched the exit pass them by, his heart gripped with the sinking feeling that he might never see his wife and daughter again.

A moment later, Buck moved into the right-hand lane and then veered off the road completely through a narrow section with no guard rail. The Hummer bounced up and down violently. Up ahead, Paul could see where the 166 intersected with the highway they'd just left. If they couldn't make the exit, they'd create their own. One more reason why keeping the gas-guzzling Hummer had been a good idea.

Soon, Paul suggested they exit the 166 altogether and travel via Campbellton Road, which would bring them into the city while bypassing the main arteries.

Mile by mile they drew closer. But so too were Finch's men and they were not to be underestimated. It was coming down to the wire, and Paul could only pray that their luck would hold out.

Chapter 33

By the time Finch and his men pulled up on the corner of Edgewood and Piedmont Avenue, the streets were nearly empty.

Finch had been in the lead vehicle with Jax. Behind them were Sweets and PJ. The journey into Atlanta had involved a complex game of cat-and-mouse with the military, who seemed eager to keep them out. Finch wasn't so much worried about the radiation suits he'd seen them wearing. Hell, everyone was going to die at some point. His real concern had been about being recognized. A couple years back his case had been all over the airwaves. Air Force instructor convicted of raping young female cadets—they'd slapped his face on the front page of every newspaper across the country. But there was one thing working in Finch's favor, something working in the favor of men just like Finch all over the country. And that thing was hysteria.

It had a funny way of laying a glaze over people's minds, disconnecting them from less subtle concerns, such as: "Where have I seen that man's face before?"

Finch leaned forward and glared with his one good eye—he wore a leather patch over the other—at the apartment building across the street. It was a modern-looking red-brick structure perfectly in line with Atlanta's growing reputation as a modern city. This wasn't the Old South anymore. They'd come a long way since General Sherman's infamous march to the sea where he'd burned Atlanta to the ground.

Finch turned to Jax, who was watching him intently.

"Any word from Daryl and Huck?" Finch asked, adjusting the leather eye patch.

There was genuine concern on Jax's face as he shook his head. In his lap was the walkie-talkie. For more than twelve hours now, they hadn't heard so much as a peep from their companions.

"Don't you worry, we'll find them." Finch's fatherly tone consoled him despite the fact that Jax was fifteen years his senior. "You sure this is it?"

Jax fumbled out what was now little more than a crumpled and torn scrap of paper. "160 Edgewood, apartment 603." He squinted as he searched the front of the building for the address. "Yup, that's her all right."

They exited their vehicles, all four of them, tucking pistols away from view. In spite of the sea of cars angling to get in and out of the city, the streets of the downtown core were ghostly quiet. Anyone with any sense had either already left or was hiding in a basement somewhere. *Let the piglets hoard*, Finch thought, closing the door behind him and locking it out of habit. *That way when our supplies run low, we can play the big bad wolf and huff and puff until I blow their houses down.*

In his mind, people who stockpiled were like a bank account he could draw upon whenever the need arose.

They crossed the street and headed for the apartment building. The recessed front entrance was glass and Finch's heart jumped into his throat. Someone had already shattered it. A plywood board had been put in its place.

"How cute," Finch said, waving Sweets forward.

The three-hundred-pound black man stuffed a Baby Ruth in his pocket as he ambled up to the entrance and smacked the plywood board with the palm of his giant hand, sending it crashing to the ground.

The elevators wouldn't be working. Now the real huffing and puffing would begin. PJ and Finch were fine. But Jax, who'd smoked like a house fire from the age of twelve, and Sweets, who hadn't exercised in about as long, were having a rough time. By the second-floor landing, both men were wheezing like demons. "Don't you die on me, Sweets," Finch told the fat man. "No... sir."

They reached the sixth floor and came to a long hallway with apartment units on either side. Finch checked the numbers as he hurried on, Sweets and Jax several meters in the rear. At last he saw what he was looking for. Apartment 603. The door frame was already cracked in places. It was starting to look as though someone else had had the same idea.

"I hope we haven't arrived too late," Finch said to PJ, who nodded with concern. "You broke me out of Leavenworth and I owe you for that," PJ told Finch. "But once you have your fun, I head to Gainesville."

"These men crossed me, PJ. I'm not sure if you fully understand that. You'll leave when I tell you you can leave." An eerie look settled over Finch's face, the one that normally signalled a psychotic shift.

PJ's hands rose in a defensive gesture. "Sarge, I was just saying."

Finch turned to Sweets and Jax, who had just caught up.

"Should we knock?" PJ asked, trying to change the subject.

"Sweets will do the knocking, won't you?" Finch said.

The others stepped aside as Sweets moved into position.

That was when the door behind them opened and an older woman in a robe appeared.

"Oh," she said, surprised, holding the fabric of her robe together with one hand. "I thought you were the National Guard again."

"Do we look like the National Guard, lady?" Finch said, moving toward her.

The woman recoiled and hurried to slam the door, but not before Finch's foot stopped it cold.

"Tie her up," he told Jax and PJ. "And grab anything she has of value."

PJ hesitated for a moment before Finch gave him a look. PJ disappeared inside to the sounds of muffled screams, evidence that Jax was already busy carrying out the boss's orders.

Once their uninvited guest was taken care of, Sweets waddled back into position and took a deep breath before he gave the apartment door a powerful kick. The sound of splintering wood was followed by a muted crash as the door went crashing to the ground.

On the heels of that came another boom, this one from a shotgun inside the apartment. The blast caught Sweets directly in the chest and threw him back against the frame behind him. He reached into the brim of his baggy sweat pants, withdrew his pistol and managed to get off three wild shots before a second blast silenced him.

Numb with shock, Finch staggered away, reaching for his own pistol in the process. That was when the big guy with the white beard and the baseball cap stepped into the hallway.

Chapter 34

Only minutes before Finch and his men reached the sixth floor, before Sweets' chest was turned into hamburger meat by Buck's shotgun, Paul dashed down the hallway of Autumn's apartment, heading for the trash room. He'd been told to stay there until he heard the shooting start. Then he was to burst out from his hiding place, pistol in hand, to catch them in a crossfire.

Due in part to Paul's lack of firearms training, Buck would be the one to use the shotgun and then switch to his old AR-15 they'd reclaimed from the back of the Hummer. Susan and Autumn, the only ones Finch expected to find at the apartment, would stay hidden in the bedroom with Buck's pistol until the shooting stopped.

Paul was breathing heavily now, sucking in the sickly sweet smell of rotting trash as it wafted up the chute, still elated as he recalled the moment barely six minutes before when he and Buck had arrived. With the Hummer parked on a side street, they'd charged up the emergency stairwell, terrified of what they might find. Would it be the bodies of his wife and daughter sprawled on the floor? Or maybe something far worse.

But thankfully that hadn't been the case. Susan had swung the door open after spotting them through the peephole and jumped into Paul's arms, tears streaming down her cheeks. She looked exhausted and a touch thinner, if that was possible. Autumn had run into his arms next and Paul had squeezed her so tight she begged him to stop. Even Buck joined in on the festivities momentarily.

Susan's fingers had found the crusted blood at Paul's temple where the bullet had grazed him. "What happened?"

"Never mind that now," Buck had scolded them. "Leave your things. We need to get out of here right away."

Paul, Susan, and Autumn didn't need to be told twice and were heading for the hallway when Buck called them back. He was standing by the window in the apartment, staring at the street below.

"They're already here."

"What?" Paul replied in disbelief.

"Who's here?" Susan asked.

A muffled sound from downstairs told them the piece of plywood over the front entrance had just been knocked in.

"There's no time," Buck barked. He removed the pistol he kept tucked under his belt and handed it to Susan. "Take Autumn into the bedroom and don't come out unless you hear one of us call you."

Susan looked at Paul and hesitated.

"Do what he says," Paul told her. And the lie that followed flowed off his tongue so easily he almost believed it himself. "Buck and I will be fine."



When the signal came, Paul felt all the moisture in his mouth evaporate. Two deafening blasts rang out and with that he charged from his hiding place, holding the pistol with both hands as Buck had showed him.

The scene which greeted his eyes was one of pure chaos. On the ground near Autumn's apartment was the body of a large black man, his chest a mess of blood and bone. Standing over him was Buck, kicking the gun from the dead man's fingers.

Between them was Finch, a thick leather patch covering the spot where Buck's pocketknife had torn open his eye. Paul fired at once and puffs of drywall exploded around his target. Finch did the same and Paul closed his eyes, anticipating the searing bullet that never came.

Now it was Buck's turn and he began to level his shotgun. From out of the apartment behind him came Jax with a silver pistol and Paul barely had time to shout a warning. Buck spun and both he and Jax pulled their triggers at the exact same time. Jax's face melted away in a spray of blood and bone. Buck was also hit and collapsed onto the ground, the shotgun sliding away from him and pinning the AR-15 under his body as he fell.

Paul was only a few feet away from Finch now when he looked down in horror. The slide of his Beretta had pulled back. Out of ammo, he was only feet away from Finch and there was nothing he could do.

Finch saw this too and aimed his silver .38 revolver at Paul for the killing blow. Tucked in the front of Finch's jeans were two more pistols, making him look like a twenty-first-century version of Blackbeard.

"I guess you got what you wanted," Paul said, feeling terrible for letting Buck down and even worse for letting Finch finish them off like dogs.

PJ appeared in the hallway then, studying the carnage around him with disgust. At his feet was Buck, who was moving slightly.

"Kill the fat man," Finch ordered PJ.

But PJ didn't budge. From where Paul was standing, he looked like he'd had enough of all this.

"He's your prize," PJ said. "Why not kill him yourself?"

A shot rang out and Paul's heart stuttered in his chest, but it wasn't Buck who got shot.

PJ clutched his chest, his eyes growing wide in disbelief. "You killed me," he said before crumpling to the floor.

"I don't tolerate insubordination," Finch said. "Nor do I let the guilty go unpunished." He squeezed the trigger of his .38 and the cylinder made a slow, lazy roll before it clicked empty. Finch looked down at his pistol with surprise.

That was when Paul remembered the squirt gun in his pocket. In a single motion he jabbed his hand in, yanking the plastic water gun free just as Finch was busy reaching for his other two pistols. Paul pumped the trigger, driving a burst of urine directly into Finch's face. Jerking his head away in pain, Finch clenched his eye shut just as he came up with both guns, ready to fire. Three shots rang out, but this time Finch's head was thrown forward as a bullet passed through the side of his skull and exited at an angle through his one remaining eye.

Down the hallway, not twenty feet away, stood Susan, a pistol in her hand and a trail of smoke rising up from the barrel.

Chapter 35

Paul stood staring at his wife in amazement as she lowered the pistol. She fell to her knees beside her father. Paul rushed to his side as well. They searched him for an entry wound and found one right below his collar bone.

"It's pretty close to his heart," Susan said. She wiped some blood from his face and beard. Leaning him over, Susan felt for where the bullet came out.

"There's no exit wound," she said with surprise. "Must still be in there. Dad, can you hear me?"

Buck opened his eyes, looking groggy.

"I was wrong," he said.

"Wrong about what?" Paul asked, puzzled.

Buck motioned to Susan and back to Paul. "The two of you make a great team."

Paul smiled. "He musta hit his head on the way down, cause he's never this nice."

"Fine, I take it back."

"There's the Buck we know and love," Paul replied.

"Can you sit?" Susan asked, helping her father move his back against the wall.

Autumn peeked into the hallway. "Is Grampa alive?"

"Yes," Paul said. "But go next door and make sure your neighbor's okay."

"We're gonna need to get him to a hospital," Susan said, disappearing and then coming back a second later with a towel she used to help stem the bleeding.

"Stop fussing," Buck snapped. "I'll be fine."

"No, you won't," Paul told him. "We did what we needed to do, now let's make sure this doesn't get any worse." He turned to Susan. "I'll get some water."

She began to protest as he left and it wasn't until he got to the washroom in Autumn's apartment that he understood why. The smell of decomposing flesh was horrendous. Lying in the bathtub wrapped in a shower curtain was a dead body.

He ran back right away.

"Uh...."

"Yeah, I'll tell you all about it when we're on the road," Susan said. "I never wanna come back here as long as I live."

Autumn appeared. "I just untied her. She's really scared, Dad, but otherwise I don't think they hurt her."

Paul collected all the loose weapons and threw them into one of Autumn's soccer duffel bags. "I don't wanna have any of these guns falling into the wrong hands."

"What about the bodies?" Autumn said, pulling her shirt over her nose.

Paul looked at Susan. "We don't have time or the muscle to move them all, especially the huge guy."

Slowly, the three of them helped Buck down the stairs and into the back of the Hummer. Autumn slid in next to him while Paul and Susan sat in the front. Paul would drive. He started the Hummer and peered back at Buck, who was looking pale. But that was only the start of their worries. Paul pointed to a yellow box at Susan's feet. The Geiger counter.

"Grab that thing and turn the black knob to X10." That was the readout which would indicate the levels of radiation in the air.

Susan did so and watched the needle flicker.

"I'm reading four," she said.

Paul shook his head. "We need to hightail it."

"What's it mean?" Autumn asked.

"It means," Buck struggled to say from the back seat, "that the radiation from the coast has arrived and it's only gonna get worse. If that needle creeps any higher we're gonna need to stop and get the hazmat suits on."

They started to pull out onto Edgewood Avenue when Paul suddenly slammed on the brakes, nearly colliding with a military convoy of Humvees. The rear vehicle stopped before them and a soldier in a radiation suit got out.

He approached the window and removed the helmet of his suit.

"Brett?" Susan said with surprise.

Brett glanced in. "Ma'am, glad to see you and your daughter are all right."

Buck and Paul exchanged a glance.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news," Brett told them.

"Can it be worse than nuclear bombs destroying half a dozen American cities?" Paul asked.

Brett ran a hand through his spiky hair. "It may be. There's been a coup. General Perkins declared himself President with unlimited executive powers."

The four of them were speechless.

"Isn't that illegal?" Paul asked. In the rear view, he could see Buck fuming, but in too much pain to engage in his usual rant.

"Sort of a moot point now, I guess," Brett replied. "But there's more. I can see by the looks of things you folks are on your way out of town. Only problem is President Perkins has declared all major cities be locked down. No one can come or go."

"That's insane," Autumn cried.

"The radiation is getting stronger," Brett said. "And there's no outrunning it. One place is as good as another."

"But we've got a seriously injured man," Paul said, motioning to Buck. "Is there a hospital somewhere we can take him to?"

"I'm sorry," Brett said and started to walk away. A second later he came back to the window. "Wait here a minute, will you?"

Paul nodded, watching Brett walk back to his vehicle. "Is there something we should know?" Paul asked, referring to Susan's familiarity with Brett. "I didn't think we were gone that long."

"He saved us from crooked cops who were trying to break in," Autumn told him.

"Crooked cops?"

Susan touched Paul's knee. "I'll explain later."

"What now?" Autumn asked fearfully.

Buck took a deep breath. "I told you the government couldn't be trusted."

They were being locked into what was quickly becoming a deathtrap. And there were only two hazmat suits in the back of the Hummer. Finch and his men had likely taken the others. They needed to find somewhere to hide until it was safe to travel outside again.

Susan clicked the Geiger counter back on and listened to it click and chirp.

"The needle's moved up to five," she said.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before they all received a fatal dose of radiation. Buck's untreated wound might eventually kill him, but that might make him the lucky one.

A knock at the window startled Paul. Brett was back.

"Our unit's pulling out," Brett said. "We're relocating to a bunker outside the city. Seeing that you have someone in acute need of medical attention, I've managed to secure permission to bring you with us."

The smiles on Susan and Autumn's faces were stretched from ear to ear.

"Thank you," Susan told him. "You've saved our lives twice now."

"Don't mention it," he said and put his helmet back on before heading for his Humvee.

Could the bunker Brett mentioned be the same one Paul had seen the artifacts being sent to? Some kind of doomsday repository for the last of humanity's hopes and dreams. Maybe they would be safe there.

Paul glanced back at Buck and then Susan and Autumn. If they didn't go, they'd be as good as dead. Perhaps afterward, once the radiation had begun to clear, they could set out on the road again and head for home. Paul was hopeful that would be the case and even more hopeful that when the time came, they'd be allowed to leave.

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